Good Cheer 1900

THE "GOOD WORDS" CHRISTMAS STORY

HOW CYNTHIA WENT A-MAYING

A ROMANCE OF LONG AGO

Wherein the Siege of Wardour Castle is Truly Chronicled

BY

CHRISTOPHER HARE

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ILLUSTRATED BY A. D. M'CORMICK

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'Twas when they raised, 'mid sap and siege,
The banners of their rightful liege,
At their she-captain's call,
Who, miracle of womankind!
Lent mettle to the merest hind
That mann'd her castle wall.

HOW CYNTHIA WENT A-MAYING

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CHAPTER I

Crabbed Age and Youth
Cannot live together;
Youth is full of pleasance,
Age is full of care.

CYNTHIA was at the end of her patience. All that long afternoon, an eternity of weariness, she had been sitting bolt upright in the stiff high-backed chair, with her hands crossed on her lap, while the preacher's voice droned on and a sleepy echo rumbled through the great hall.

The girl's vagrant thoughts had wandered far afield from that time present—the last Sunday in April of the year 1643—and from the grave words of solemn teaching poured forth with such patient zeal. They woke no responsive chord in her untempered spirit. Moreover, she was in a mood of rebellion, and told herself indignantly that had her father, Sir Hugh Damerel, been at home, no Independent minister would have crossed his threshold.

It was all her stepmother's doing. Yonder she sat, Dame Thomasine, in her big carved chair on a raised daïs, against a dark background of oak wainscoting; her gaunt figure set off by a stiff black velvet gown, and her face framed in a white satin hood. From a low stool at her feet, her son Paul, a boy of six, looked on demurely with patience written on his small pale face. Beneath the minstrels' gallery, in half shadow, the entire household of Sutton Place was gathered together, the maids in their high caps and the men in jerkin and doublet.

There came a sudden pause in the sermon and Cynthia looked up, her lips parted and eyebrows arched with eager hope that the end was at hand. But good Master Balsum slowly raised the hour-glass whose sands had run out; he gave it a tremulous shake and turned it over to run its course once more. Alas! this meant that she would be cooped up for another hour, while outside the cheerful sun was shining and the world was at play. For all her seventeen years she was but a restless, eager child.

Close in front of her the great massive black door, studded with nails, stood ajar, and through the narrow opening paradise gleamed to her longing eyes. Like a heavenly flood across the threshold poured in the golden sunshine, heralded by a fluty concert of neighbouring thrushes, while the soft spring air was laden with the mellow scent of gilliflowers and pinks from the old-world garden without.

The girl was a prisoner in that solemn darkened chamber, while the glorious outdoor world wooed and beckoned her and every fibre of her being thrilled in vain with passionate response. Her life-blood was tingling with youth repressed, and she felt stirring within her the vague resistless forces of spring and nature.

Suddenly there came a change over her sensitive face, and she almost held her breath, as she waited on the tiptoe of awe-struck expectation. There on the yellow stones before her, in the very midst of the patch of dappled sunshine, stood a jackdaw with glossy black wings, his head daintily perked forwards and turned up inquisitively. He was evidently bent on mischief, for every quiver of his sharp beak and perked-up tail betrayed him; he knew perfectly well that he had no business there.

Cynthia leant forward with a swift alluring smile, and her cheeks flushed with unlooked-for excitement. It was her tame jackdaw who came at her call, and fed from her hand, and flew out from his ivied nook to follow her at the first sound of her footfall in the garden. Being also gifted with much worldly wisdom, the bird divided his attentions between his mistress and the kitchen, where he picked up profane language, and was by turns the delight and the torment of the maids.

Hitherto he had not ventured to disturb a solemn exposition, and even now maybe a warning gesture might have driven him away. But at that critical moment Cynthia was so weary and resentful that she welcomed any interruption and, regardless of consequences, gave her pet a beckoning sign. Gravely and solemnly the jackdaw walked in, and with a sudden jerk flew up on the great oak table. The level ring of the preacher's voice had caught his ear, and he strutted sedately towards him, crying out in a shrill high tone his last lesson:

"Fie, for shame, sir! Plague on thee, Jack!" rising to a hoarse burst of chuckling, ha! ha!

For one startled moment Master Balsum peered forward with his short-sighted eyes, and then broke off with a sudden cry of dismay as the bird pecked spitefully at his lean fingers and the book outspread before him.

This was too much for Cynthia's gravity, and her ringing laugh woke the echoes of the old hall. The contagion of mirth was irresistible, and the demure rows of men and maids, who had sat stolidly patient so long, broke forth in loud guffaws and stifled giggling.

Dame Thomasine, abruptly roused from her peaceful attitude of attention—folded hands and closed eyes—which to the unwary so closely resembled slumber, started up in a very passion of wrath, as little Paul piped out above the disturbing sounds:

"'Tis Sissy's jackdaw as be a-swearen!"

A guilty silence followed, and there was a moment's breathless pause; the hush which heralds the outbreak of the storm. Then the words of the mistress came, loud and imperious, each one striking like a blow:

"The knaves and wenches may carry their profane, unseemly mirth elsewhere! They will have cause to rue this hour. Begone, I say! I will suffer no more casting of pearls before swine. As for you, Cynthia, my daughter, I have a word to say to you," she added, with frozen self-control.

It was wonderful how quickly the congregation dispersed, followed in haste by the wily jackdaw. Then Dame Thomasine turned to the startled girl.

"Cynthia, I will no longer brook these pestilent ways. You will forthwith to your chamber and there abide until silence and penitence have wrought you to a better mind."

With full-couraged eyes she faced her stepmother, but her cheeks flamed scarlet and there was an ominous quiver on the delicate lips. For a moment dismay checked her speech, and before she had recovered herself a clear fresh young voice rang out in impetuous wrath:

"Nay, Madam, this may not be! I protest——"

"Godfrey, you foolish lad, hold your peace!" interrupted his sister, as she laid a restraining hand on the tall, slim, handsome young fellow by her side. He had been suddenly roused from peaceful slumber in a quiet nook behind the great carved screen, and this was the first intimation of his presence.

"I will not have you entangled in my quarrel," added the girl with passionate emphasis. "As you love me, go hence and leave me to bear my chiding alone!"

Then Master Balsum spoke, with the timid, halting manner of one unused to such domestic brawls. "I pray you, honoured lady, that justice be tempered with mercy. Indeed I bear no malice . . . 'twas but the playful frolic of a child. . ."

"Call you that a child, forsooth?" cried Madam, as she pointed an accusing finger at the fair young creature, who stood erect with shining eyes by her brother's side, near of his height, with vagrant curls of the same ruddy gold. "Why, 'tis a woman grown, my good friend, and like to be wed at her father's good pleasure! Maybe he hath already in view a sober-minded suitor, whose godly discipline she doth sorely need."

Cynthia shrank back in alarm and sudden shame. Never had her stepmother's pitiless tongue so scourged and humiliated her. Without one word, one plea for pardon, she stole away to seek her narrow turret-chamber as a refuge and hiding-place. She did not even see the wistful gaze of little Paul, who dimly felt that he was losing his dear playfellow.

To his childish fancy it was as if some one had gone up a big ladder and taken down the sun, and rolled up the garden and the flowers and the gladness, like a carpet, and put them all away in a dark cupboard.

Meantime his sister had plenty of time for quiet thought in her lonely prison. Full of vague misgivings, she wondered how far there was any ground for this terrible threat. Her father had always been so good to her, and she was too loyal to mistrust him.

Her thoughts wandered back to the past, those far-off days of her own mother, when they dwelt much in a stately house by the riverside at Chelsea. Then a sudden blow had fallen, and in one short week Sir Thomas Damerel had lost his wife and two young children from the fever. Only Cynthia and Godfrey were left to him, and for their sake he gave up his career and settled down in his old family manor-house in Wiltshire. Here the girl and boy had been his constant companions, had gone a-hunting and a-hawking with him, and had found in the breezy downs, the woodland paths and the flower-spangled meadows, a constant heritage of delight.

But a sad change was in store for them. The time came when Sir Hugh Damerel was once more roused from his country pursuits to take an interest in public life. The trial in 1637 of John Hampden, who had been a friend of his, called him back to his political duties. Finding his own house at Chelsea somewhat dreary and lonesome, full of haunting memories, he took a lodging for a time in the City. Here an adventure befell him one dark winter night.

He was passing through St. Paul's Churchyard, on his way back from a late sitting, when he was set upon and robbed by highwaymen, who left him lying insensible in the gutter, and made good use of their heels and the darkness. Possibly they made their escape into sanctuary at St. Martin-le-Grand, for the rogues were soon out of sight and hearing, and for that ill deed never met with their deserts. Fortunately for Sir Hugh, who might have been left there all night as far as the watch was concerned, a worthy City merchant chanced to come by, with his servingman bearing a lantern. He acted the part of the good Samaritan and had the injured man taken to his own house in Aldersgate Street. Here Mistress Thomasine Damarr, the goldsmith's sister, nursed the good knight so well and to such good purpose that he married her, partly out of gratitude, but above all because he saw in her such a tender guide and friend to his motherless daughter.

Too late he found out his mistake, as other men in like case have done. Cynthia bitterly resented the coming of a new mistress. She was full of burning jealousy at being thrust aside from the first place with her father, and she could never forgive her stepmother for sending Godfrey away to the big school at Sherbourne. The poor girl missed her brother terribly, for he had been her constant companion, and she had even shared the lessons of his tutor, the old parson of Sutton, in whose charge their father had left them.

Life would have been utterly unbearable to Cynthia Damerel, but that Dame Thomasine had no love for the country and spent most of her time at the Chelsea mansion, finding an excuse in her husband's town engagements, after he had been elected member of the Long Parliament.

Then the girl was happy once more in her freedom, for the spinning-wheel and the embroidery were tossed aside, and the only study which she kept up was her music, to which she was passionately devoted. Those

"With full-couraged eyes she faced her stepmother"

were red-letter days when her father's old friend Mr. Henry Lawes was staying with his kinsfolk at Dinton, and would walk over to give her a lesson on the spinet or the lute.

Even on that doleful evening when the young rebel found herself a prisoner in her turret-chamber, after a time she turned for comfort to her beloved music. She took her precious lute from the foot of her couch, where she usually kept it, wrapped in a blanket for the sake of an equable temperature, difficult elsewhere to find in that great cold, draughty house.

Then she turned over the pages in her little parchment music-book, where she had carefully written out the score herself. Having tuned her lute, she began to pick out the notes of a song from the "Masque of Comus," by Mr. John Milton, which her master had but lately set to music.

Sabrina fair,
Listen where thou art sitting
Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave,
In twisted braids of lilies knitting
The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair.

She began bravely enough, and then broke off.

She was out of tune with the world and with herself; the sweet notes were jangled, and with a sigh she gave it up, for even here was nought but discord.

CHAPTER II

When many a merry tale and many a song
Cheered the rough road, we wished the rough road long;
The rough road then, returning in a round,
Mocked our enchanted steps, for all was fairy ground.

WHEN Cynthia awoke the next morning a

yellow bar of sunlight was already slanting through the high narrow window upon the raftered ceiling. Fresh from her dreamless sleep, which had brushed away all disturbing alarms, she rose in haste, her soul lightly poised as a bird on the wing, to whom freedom is the very breath of life.

The only approach to her bedchamber was from that of Dame Thomasine, who was wont to rouse her at daybreak, but to-day the usual brisk summons came not. Time passed on; the golden sheaf of sunshine moved slowly downward and eastward on the walls, lighting up the dusky strip of tapestry. Still all was silence, for no cheerful household sounds could pierce those thick walls; the door remained closely barred, and her heart misgave her. Could it be that she was in very truth a prisoner?

It seemed a long weary while before there was a shuffle of feet outside, the creaking bolt was thrust back, and a red-faced, bare-armed serving-wench appeared, bearing a small pitcher of milk and manchets of white bread on a platter.

"Ah, my good Budget!" she cried, "right glad I be to see thee. But tell me, how long think you that Madam is like to keep me mewed up here?"

"Why, Mistress Cynthia, haven' 'ee heard the news? Doan't 'ee know as a message be a-comed late last night, an' even now my Lady be a-setten forth to Lunnon town? I'll be bound as thee mid get a sight of her out o' yon window."

With a startled exclamation, Cynthia sprang to her feet. The narrow casement was high up, but by standing on her oaken chest she could look down on the broad terrace in front of the great overhanging doorway.

Sure enough, there was all the commotion of departure: two great Flemish mares with pillions, on one of which Abigail the maid was already mounted, while Jasper the coachman, in his best doublet and hose, held the other. Dame Thomasine was standing on the topmost step of the horseblock, evidently prepared for a journey, in her laced riding suit with a fur-lined mantle and hood. She had taken leave of little Paul and of Godfrey, who stood leaning against the wall, in careless stripling grace. But he took off his plumed hat with a deep bow, as the procession presently got under weigh, joined by a stable-boy astride the pack-horse, and slowly passed under the broad archway of the gate-house into the sunny stretch of white road beyond.

The girl had been too much engrossed by the scene before her to speak or move, but now she sprang down from her high place in fiery indignation.

"To think that Madam should have played me such a scurvy trick! Thus to set off on a jaunt to Chelsea, and leave me prisoned in my chamber; why, 'tis scandalous! Aye, for she knoweth well how I would have loved the ride to Salisbury and then to come back with old Jasper, the while she taketh coach to London! But I will be even with her yet, by my faith I do vow it!" added the girl impetuously, and with that took to pacing up and down the floor.

Then of a sudden she turned upon the maid, who stood watching open-mouthed, her eyes full of sheer pity and dismay.

"Hark 'ee, Budget, go and pray Master Godfrey to see to it that our horses be saddled forthwith, and all made ready for a long day's ride. Make thou urgent haste, for I will brook no delay!"

Cowed by the imperious tone, the serving-wench shuffled off, and her slippered feet pattered briskly along the oaken floor, to do the bidding of her young mistress.

Cynthia was soon ready. With this new purpose in view, her spirits rose to a lively pitch. She did full justice to her belated breakfast, and then had but to put on her blue camlet riding petticoat and silver-laced bodice, and to seek out her hooded mantle of grey cloth and her embroidered leathern gloves. Then she tossed her head and with a sprightly air made her way out, riding-whip in hand, humming the while a careless tune.

She passed through the deserted chamber of Dame Thomasine, with its massive carved bedstead and silken hangings, and then down the broad oak staircase on whose hard polished surface the heels of her Spanish riding-shoes woke the echoes at every step.

As she crossed the great hall her passing glance rested for a moment on the curious inlaid clock which showed the signs of the Zodiac as well as the days of the month, and with a smile she welcomed as a happy omen that the hand pointed to the first of May.

Through the open doorway she tripped airily forth to greet her brother with the merry cry: "A-Maying will we go!"

As they passed out together from beneath the shadow of the turreted gateway, the girl seemed to have left all the tangles of her young life behind. The magic of the Spring was throbbing in her veins, and the glorious sunshine of that rare May day paled before the inner radiance of those young creatures, in the full heyday of youth and health. The joy of life, the conscious pride of strength and freedom, laughed out in the ringing music of those fresh clear voices and the changing light of the eager faces.

And if their own private troubles had thus melted away like a summer cloud was it strange that, half in ignorance and unconscious selfishness, their life's horizon should be bounded by their own narrow experience?

What though the great civil strife between king and people had already let loose the dogs of war? What though rumours of coming battle and deadly conflict filled the air; and in many an English home hearts were torn asunder with burning questions of the divine right of kings and the will and freedom of the people? What though brother learned to look in hate upon brother, and father to turn from son as an alien; while far and wide men made ready to fight their nearest and dearest to the bitter end?

What concern was all this to Cynthia and Godfrey Damerel? Those light-hearted children little recked as yet of all the crushing burden of a kingdom's woe. They still lingered rejoicing in paradise, and the foreboding voice was silent which warns of a coming day when the angel's flaming sword will bar all return.

"Come, Sissy, we will take the bridle-path through the copse, and then cross over Sutton terrace. 'Tis the shortest way to Tisbury," Godfrey had cried; and straightway they found themselves on the edge of the greenwood which they loved.

Who can describe the mystic charm of the wild woodland glen on such a glorious spring morning? Over the long grass, hoary with dew, they rode ankle deep, as they passed into the hazel copse which fringed the narrow way. Through the russet leaves of a dead winter, delicate blue-green spears of young bracken shot forth, with fronds still half uncurled, nestling under the emerald foliage of budding alder.

The wild cherry flaunted its foam of silvery blossom against the reddened background of young oak leaves, and the pale tasselled birches quivered at every breath of wind which, sweeping on, revealed the shining underside of the poplar leaves.

Noiselessly the horses passed on under a clump of dark fir-trees, which threw a deeper shade athwart the soft bed of fallen needles, until they reached the chestnut aisles, gorgeous with their sea-green fans in contrast with old weather-beaten trunks, draped in grey lichen and shaggy moss. Everywhere was the green shimmer and delicate tracery of new leaves, through which the dappled sunshine gleamed upon the boy and girl.

They were a goodly pair. Cynthia, on her Spanish mare which she sat in perfect ease, fair to look on, with her warm rosy colour, deep blue eyes pencilled by dark lashes, and curls of mellow gold which had escaped from her simple coif and floated like a nimbus round her head.

"O Godfrey, gather me a posy!" she cried, as she pointed to a flush of yellow daffodils, which seemed to dance in rings amid the tangled undergrowth, while farther back the shadows were purple with violets in the hollows.

The boy had already sprung from his saddle, when she checked him with an afterthought.

"Nay, they would but fade in the sun; we will pluck them on our way back."

She said no more. Hers was a silent ecstasy. She had no words to describe the voluptuous joy which entered in by every sense.

The air was laden with sweet odours and alive with melodious sounds. The clarion call of the thrush; the blackbird singing flute-like to his mate; a chatter of sedge-warblers, and a scolding of white-throats; here the crack of a woodpecker's beak, there the cry of the cuckoo courting in the oak trees.

At length they came to a sun-struck clearing, where the very ground was carpeted with the dainty bells of blue hyacinths, and as they paused and idled once more in sheer delight, they were suddenly startled by the familiar cry of a child's voice.

"O Sissy, dear Sissy, take me with you!"

Cynthia gave a startled glance and could hardly believe her eyes. It was indeed her half-brother, little Paul, whom she recognised in the lonely, disconsolate figure amongst the flowers. Certainly it was no great distance from home, for they had lingered and ridden mostly at a foot's pace, but it was far for so young a child to walk.

Godfrey was at his side in a moment. "Why, my little man, how come you here?" he asked gently.

"'Tis Patty as brings me here, an' she do leave me all alone. . . an' I be a-feared," sobbed the child, in a burst of self-pity.

"Patty leaves you here all by yourself, you dear boy!" exclaimed his sister indignantly. "Where is she gone? She shall hear my mind when I find her!"

"No, no, Sissy dear, take me along o' thee," he pleaded in pitiful tones. "Patty 'll beat me if I tell 'ee about the big man wi' a torn jerkin. . . . Giles 'll set me up in front o' he. That's where Mammie lets me ride," he urged.

"Aye, zure enough, little measter, zo thee do; an' I'll not say thee nay," cried the good-natured serving-lad, as he hastily dismounted, and picking up the child, placed him on the big clumsy horse before him.

Cynthia looked at Godfrey in mute dismay. This was a new and unexpected dilemma.

"I fear we must fetch Patty and tell her," she said reluctantly, feeling that their journey would lose all its charm of mystery.

"Nay, that I forbid," was her brother's decided answer. "'Twill do the deceitful baggage good to have a real fright, and moreover we shall be home again betimes with him. Hurra, Paul! What a ride you shall have!"

The boy was wild with delight, and his sister silenced her misgivings, for she felt it was too late to interfere.

"Well, I never believed in that prim, smooth-spoken minx," she remarked aside to Godfrey. "How Madam has been deceived in her!"

No warning sound reached the truant nurse, for the horses' hoofs were almost noiseless on the soft mossy path as they moved slowly in single file between the fallen branches.

Soon even Cynthia forgot her scruples, and the little company was all the merrier for Paul's outspoken joy at every woodland sight and sound. A wood-pigeon shot above the tree-tops and hovered overhead, and there was a flash of blue-flecked wings as two jays flew across their path. But dearest of all was the red-furred squirrel leaping from bough to bough, which had no rival in his affections until his merry shout sent the little rabbits scurrying away to their holes, with white tails tipped up in saucy defiance.

But all too soon the travellers had reached the belt of larches which marked the limits of the wood, and found themselves close to the highway, which in those days was little better than a rutty cart road.

CHAPTER III

Hard is the heart that loveth naught,
In May when all this mirth is wrought.

CYNTHIA was riding on in front as she drew near to the green verge of the forest, and the sight of an open space for a gallop was more than she could resist. A word and a touch to Donna, who sprang forward, quite as eager as her mistress, and they were soon out of sight round the clump of blackthorn, beyond the green hazel thicket. There was a keen fresh breeze which made her blood tingle, and in the mere physical delight of rapid movement the girl did not notice how far she had ridden ahead of her companions.

It was strange, she thought, to see so many people on the road, all in holiday garb, until she remembered that there would be a Maypole, with sports and revels, that day at Tisbury. As she drew rein and pulled up to a slower pace, she was abruptly reminded of her lonely position. Two or three rough men, who looked like disbanded soldiers, hustled up against her, and one seized Donna's bridle.

"Who've us got here?" cried a hoarse voice. "Some play-acting trollop nar'a doubt! Look 'ee at her long wild hair, all aflame! Sure now, you mun a-ben born o' bonfire-night, my dear! Gi' us a lock vor to mind 'ee by!"

As he spoke he put out a big grimy hand to catch hold of a stray curl, but the girl was too quick for him. She struck him a sharp cut with her riding-whip.

"Unhand me, you knave! I have friends at hand. Godfrey! Giles! come to my help!" she shouted.

But they were far behind, for Godfrey had lingered to play with the child, and poor old Captain was never meant for a racer. It would have fared badly with the girl if some stranger had not galloped forward to her help.

There was a brief struggle; then, before she was fully aware what had happened, she heard a man's voice ringing out sharp and clear:

"Let this teach you to insult a lady on the highway, aye, or a woman of any degree, you insolent ruffians," he added, as he caught muttered words of abuse from the men who were cowering from him, and skulking away.

"Gideon, keep them in sight," he cried to a stout serving-man on a pack-horse behind. "There be stocks and a pillory nigh at hand for such miscreants."

Then the young man turned towards the girl he had rescued, and it struck him that she was well worth looking at. Cynthia's hooded cloak had fallen back on her shoulders, her cheeks glowed and her dark eyes sparkled with excitement, while her wonderful hair glittered like a web of spun gold in the sunshine. She sat erect and defiant, and her breath still came quickly, but she looked up with curiosity at her defender.

She saw a massively built, strong-limbed young fellow, with brown hair curling round his brow, well-marked features sunburnt as though he lived in the open air, and clear blue eyes which rested upon her face with a glint of fun in them. Something tickled his fancy in this adventure, for it was a new experience to go about as a knight-errant and rescue damsels in distress.

He wore a broad-brimmed beaver hat with a sweeping plume, a riding suit of russet green velvet with some silver braid, and a short cloak of the same hung over his left shoulder. He was well armed, with a brace of pistols in his holster and a silver-mounted rapier in his belt, and he rode a splendid bay.

All this Cynthia took in with one rapid and sweeping glance, and there was scarcely a pause before she spoke.

"'Twas mighty good luck which brought you to my help, and I thank you right heartily."

Not a trace of confusion in her manner, not a tremulous quiver in her voice; she was as simple and unaffected as a child, and the stranger looked with wondering interest at this pretty girl, blooming towards womanhood, all unconscious.

"Nay, madam, the good fortune was on my side," he began, raising his plumed hat with a courtly bow. But before he had time to finish his sentence there was a tramp of horses, and Godfrey rode up, closely followed by Giles, with the boy.

He had vaguely seen what had happened from a distance, and was at once angry with his sister for her escapade and self-reproachful for not having taken better care of her. But his hasty reproaches were soon checked and his serenity restored, for with rare insight the stranger treated him with the utmost deference and respect, as though he were a grown man and his sister's rightful protector.

After this, it was natural for the whole party to ride on together, and they beguiled the way with much pleasant talk.

"Maybe you can tell me, being of these parts, where dwells Sir Hugh Damerel?" asked their new friend presently.

"That can I indeed, seeing that I am his son Godfrey, and here is Cynthia his daughter, not to take count of little Paul yonder, our half-brother," replied the lad with a merry laugh.

The young cavalier gave such a sudden start, and was so strangely embarrassed, that any one more suspicious than the brother and sister would have guessed some mystery. But they simply waited for him to introduce himself.

There was an awkward pause, then in a low grave voice he answered their unspoken question.

"My name is James Randolph, and my people are settled in the new colony of Virginia, beyond the seas." As he spoke he looked intently in Godfrey's face, and then with a heightened colour half raised his eyes towards the girl.

His glance was a challenge, but there was no response. Evidently they had never heard of him, and the name of Randolph awakened no special interest. He drew a long, deep breath of relief, and promptly

making up his mind, he added in some confusion:

"I have a letter for your father . . . Master Henry Lawes, with whom I have lodged in Salisbury, would have me carry him some music, a new setting. . . ." He hesitated, and Cynthia exclaimed eagerly:

"Oh, do you know Master Lawes? He is my dear master, and hath taught me to play the lute somewhat and a little on the spinet. Hath he taught you too?"

"Nay, mistress, that has not been my good fortune. My studies at Cambridge have been far less alluring."

"I fear me that your journey is wasted," said Godfrey, abruptly returning to the original subject. "My father is at the present away in his riverside house at Chelsea, where he can attend the Parliament of which he is a member."

"But you wrong his hospitality if you doubt that he will not gladly receive you at Sutton Place," exclaimed Cynthia impulsively, for that this should be a friend of Mr. Henry Lawes was recommendation enough for her. "At least, when Madam returns," she added, half under her breath.

"Sissy means our stepdame," explained the boy. "You will be our guest, without a doubt. But now we be all out for a jaunt, we had best have a look at the revels on our way. And mighty good luck too! Hey, Paul, my laddie, what say you to a May-pole, and maybe a dancing bear?"

The child clapped his hands with delight, but his sister looked suddenly grave.

"Is it quite seemly for us to join the revels?" she asked wistfully. "There is no need to pass through Tisbury; we might skirt the hill to reach Jennifer's home, which lies beyond on the way to Wardour."

"Sissy, I marvel at you!" exclaimed her brother impatiently. "Why, most times you be as bold as a lion, more like a brave lad than a poor timid maiden. 'Tis weary work to be always mewed up at home, and never see the gay side of life! What say you, Master Randolph?"

It was an awkward question, for the young man had his own misgivings about taking a girl to the fair. Then he remembered that she would have four stout fellows for her escort and made a compromise in his reply.

"Mistress Damerel hath shown a very pretty courage in the adventure which brought me the good fortune to serve her."

"So she did," cried Godfrey eagerly. "And take my word for it, such is ever her way. Why, sir, she is rare company. You see how she rides, and she can handle a fowling-piece or a pistol as well as I can. She can beat me sometimes at the bowls."

"Hark at him!" interrupted Cynthia, with a merry laugh. "If he blows my trumpet, 'tis an excuse to sound his own fame louder."

"Nay, but jesting apart, and in spite of all Madam's discipline, I defy you to find a wilder madcap in all Wilts!" added her brother, as he smiled at her with loving pride.

"With your left-handed praise *you*'ll be saying next that I 'must ha' ben born o' bonfire night!'" she mocked at him, while her eyes sparkled with fun and mischief.

"See what a child she is!" he retorted. "Yet, would you believe it, Master Randolph, our folks at home have a mind to see her wed? Did ever you hear such an untimely jest? Why, one might as well talk of marriage for little Paul yonder!"

There was no answer, for his companion had turned aside to hide his startled confusion at this chance remark.

Cynthia, all unconscious, rattled on.

"For my part, I hold that 'tis my stepdame's plot, for she would fain be quit of me! She says they have in mind 'a staid, discreet man, of godly discipline,' and I know what that means on her lips. Some one like good old Master Balsum, the Independent minister. Mercy on us! Think of me with a husband like that!"

But their new friend was strangely silent, and did not seem to appreciate the ludicrous side of the suggestion.

Presently he turned abruptly to Godfrey and asked him in a low voice:

"Is this all you know? Hath not the suitor's name been spoken?"

It was a curious question, but it roused no suspicion in the mind of the boy, who answered carelessly:

"No, indeed, and this precious story did but come to us by hearsay."

Here the subject dropped, for now they had reached the steep hill, up which climbed the straggling cottages of Tisbury, and it needed great care to steer their way up the

rough track which was crowded with pilgrims to the fair. Some few jogged along on horseback, or led weary beasts laden with merchandise, mostly decked out with red ribbons. But the greater number trudged on foot, for May-day was a much-prized festival of the people, the hardly entreated labouring men, young and old, with their wives and little children, all in holiday trim.

Little Paul shouted aloud, in wild delight, as a belated showman pushed his way forward with two monkeys in gay rags, riding on an ass. But when they reached the top of the hill where the tall May-pole was set up, dressed with flags and streamers of many colours, and standards green and gold, the child's excitement knew no bounds, for there before him was a real live dancing bear, his chain held by a Frenchman in a blue blouse.

Something in the smell of the animal, or maybe an hereditary dread transmitted from savage ancestry, made the horses so restless that young Randolph exclaimed:

"We had best dismount and let the grooms take our horses over to the 'Blue Boar' yonder, if we wish to see somewhat of the revels."

He looked at Cynthia, whose mood had changed, and who was now as anxious to see everything as her little brother. She drew her hood closely round her face and took Godfrey's arm, while their companion lifted Paul from the saddle and set him up on his own broad shoulder. There was some magic in this big strong fellow which won the child's homage and admiration, for he readily accepted his new friend and looked proudly down from his high perch on the rest of the world.

Although it was still early in the day, the fair was a scene of noisy, boisterous merriment. Milkmaids with garlands upon their pails danced round the May-pole to a lively popular tune, which the fiddlers scraped away at with wild zest. There were raree-shows and sports to suit every taste, for it so happened that the great fair at Wilton was held on May 4, and most of the travelling mountebanks and showmen merely took the village of Tisbury on the way.

A marvellous and bewildering sight were those May-day revels. On one side the country yokels were gaping to see a conjurer who swallowed swords and ate red-hot coals with impunity, while near him was another noisy caterer to the public amusement, with performing dogs and apes. And all the time a perfect chaos of mingled noises; the rumbling of drums, the flaring of trumpets, and the hoarse shouts of Cheap Jacks, hawking about their wares and bawling:

"What d'ye lack, my masters? What d'ye lack?"

Yet novel and exciting as all this was, perhaps of all the party little Paul alone found pure and unalloyed delight in the noisy scene. Godfrey, with an unusual sense of responsibility upon him, had vague misgivings that it was no fit place for his sister; while on this subject James Randolph had no doubt whatever.

Mere stranger and chance acquaintance as he seemed, he had his own reasons for feeling a very deep interest in Cynthia, and yet he dared not betray them. By awakening scruples and playing the part of a mentor, he would only bring self-consciousness into their simple, casual fellowship, which meant so much to him.

The girl was delicious! Such a light-hearted child, with a fine brave spirit of her own. Her wayward moods, with their changing lights and shadows, did but add to her charm with a touch of the unforeseen. And what a beauty she was too!

There was the making of a noble woman in that fresh young creature, when the sleeping soul within should awake. Would those silent voices ever echo to the clarion call of love? Or, in these troublous times, was there danger and sorrow ahead, from which he might shield her?

He was a bit of a poet, was this young Randolph, this emigrant from far Virginia; and a very fair and pleasant vision rose up before him as he lightly murmured to himself the words of a ballad he had lately come across:

By Cynthia thus do I subsist
On earth, heaven's only pride.
Let her be mine, and let who list
Take all the world beside.

CHAPTER IV

Full in the midst a mighty pile arose,
Where iron-grated gates their strength oppose
To each invading step.

CERTAINLY it took a very long time for

Cynthia to reach her destination on that May-day, for she had set her heart on paying a visit to her former nurse, Jennifer Moleyns, who dwelt beyond Tisbury. There were so many unforeseen delays. The careless, happy, lingering ride through the woods in their spring glory; then the crowded high road, the time spent amid the revels of the fair, and to end up with, a welcome meal at the village inn, of the best mine host could provide.

It happened in this way. Little Paul, catching sight of some wayfarers feasting by an open booth, suddenly discovered that he was very hungry. So they all went to the "Blue Boar," where the horses were put up, and the young travellers did full justice to the cold pasty, and cheese and rye bread, and other homely fare set before them. There was small beer stirred with a sprig of rosemary, and even a bottle of Bordeaux wine for such as had more delicate tastes.

All this took time and, when they set out on their journey again, the afternoon was well advanced. The weather, too, had changed, for clouds had risen up in that fickle blue sky and obscured the sun, while away to the west the horizon was dark and threatening. Still the little party rode on gaily and beguiled the way with merry talk; Godfrey and his sister riding side by side, and next to them, James Randolph with little Paul on the saddle in front of him, for the child would not be parted from his new friend. The two serving-men rode behind, mostly in silence. Beyond Tisbury the road was a mere waggon-track with deep ruts, where the horses had to pick their way at every step.

They must have gone nearly two miles and, after following a narrow winding lane, had reached a straggling common where a flock of geese were cropping the scanty herbage, when Cynthia pointed to some low-browed cottages which stood at the edge of the wood.

"At last we have reached our journey's end; yonder is Jennifer's home!" she cried. "Her father is the best smith in all the country round. I will go and speak with her first, lest she should be startled to see such a company. Giles, hold my bridle."

She sprang lightly to the ground, and in another minute stood before the cottage door, to which she gave a gentle tap with her riding-whip, and then tried to raise the latch. But all was securely barred and bolted; there was no answer from within, and a chill fear came over her as she noticed how strangely still and deserted the place seemed. There was no smoke rising from the roof, and through the low dim window she could discern no sign of life. Meantime Godfrey had joined her, but he too failed to rouse any one.

"Why, Sissy, they must all have gone to the May-day revels!" he remarked cheerfully.

"Oh no; you forget that Jennifer's father, old Enoch Moleyns, is a stern old Puritan. Some evil must have befallen them!"

So great was the shock of disappointment that the girl's eyes filled with tears. She had come this long journey, and set her heart on finding Jennifer.

"There may be some one in yonder hovel who can give us news," exclaimed her brother, as he hastily made his way to a wretched dwelling just beyond. She followed him, with reviving hope, and in answer to their summons a withered crone presently came to the door, followed by a great black cat, whose hair stood out as, with hunched-up back, she rubbed against her mistress. The boy drew back, with a muttered cry:

"'Tis a witch; come away, Sissy!" But Cynthia stood her ground, and asked with a good show of bravery:

"Can thee tell us, mother, where be Enoch Moleyns, the smith?" She seemed deaf and stupid, but after the question had been repeated several times, she mumbled out:

"Aye, they've a-fetched he over to the castle," and she pointed to the woods close by.

"Will he come back to-night?" shouted the girl.

The old woman shook her head. "He be gone, an' his wife along o' he, an' like to bide, zo they be. Her telled I as there be heaps o' wark vor a smith—to mend they wold muskets an' such-like."

She seemed to be thawing a little, but at that moment she caught sight of the rest of the party, and with the instinctive terror of a hunted creature, she drew back and shut and barred the door.

"What can she mean?" asked Godfrey. "I suppose there is so much work for a gunsmith at Wardour Castle that he is kept

there, but why should his wife and Jennifer go too?"

"Maybe as they wouldn' bide there alone, nigh to that tar'ble old witch body!" muttered Giles, who was looking on open-mouthed. "'Tis a luckless journey vor we, zo 'tis. But la! what could us look vor of a day when I heard a cuckoo whistle afore breakfus?" he added by way of keeping up his spirits.

There was a moment of awkward silence, for no one had any suggestion to make. James Randolph had lingered behind, in earnest talk with his man Gideon, who had kept his ears open at the "Blue Boar."

"Tell 'ee what, measter; there be mischief a-brewen,' an' too many soldiers a-hangen' about these parts! 'Tisn' safe for the likes o' they children to be a-gallivanten' on the roads. What be their folk a-thinken' of?" asked the bluff old fellow indignantly.

"True enough," thought his master. "Sir Hugh and his good lady should know better than to let a young girl run such awful risk!"

He rode up just in time to hear Cynthia's voice ring out in the tone of an undaunted leader, who would not brook opposition or defeat:

"Jennifer must have gone on to Wardour Castle to seek her father. 'Tis well; we will follow and find her there. The Lady Blanche Arundell was a dear friend of my mother, and she will welcome us gladly."

"Well said, Mistress Damerel," replied young Randolph, who had quickly made up his mind that it might be a happy fortune which would place her in the care of Lady Arundell. "Moreover, we had best make good speed, for I verily believe the threatened storm is already upon us."

It was quite true. While they had been waiting outside the cottage, the heavens had become ominously black overhead, and the rising wind moaned in the sallow willows by the low swampy wayside. There was no dissentient voice, and the horses were urged to something like a trot over the rough ground; but they had not gone many steps before the great drops began to patter down, and soon the whole landscape was blurred with a pouring sheet of rain and hail. Cynthia's first thought was for little Paul, and she would have taken off her own mantle to protect him, but his fellow-rider had forestalled her, and already muffled him up in a thick frieze cloak.

Almost blinded by the storm which came down with such pitiless fury, it seemed to the hapless riders an age before they had skirted the wood and reached the park gates. Here they turned down the long avenue of elms which gave some slight shelter, and they could dimly discern through the trees, down below in the valley, the two massive square towers of the castle. Drenched to the skin, and scarcely able to hold the rein, Cynthia felt strangely depressed, for in a sudden freak of self-distrust she began to fear that the Lady Arundell might have forgotten her. It was so long since they had met! Or what if she were away from home?—gone perchance to join her husband, who was known to be with the king at Oxford? But whatever her secret misgivings, the girl gave no sign of doubt. She held her head up and rode bravely on in front, past the big lake, and within an arrow's flight of the massive stone gateway, when she was startled by a shrill whistle from the gate-keeper's lodge.

"Maybe 'tis a challenge, Sissy!" exclaimed Godfrey, eager with excitement. "Shall I ride on first with a white kerchief tied on to my riding-whip?"

"Nay, you can give it to me, for 'tis my adventure. I will make it clear that we be friends," said the girl, and then, without more ado, she began to whistle the popular tune of:

Whoop! do me no harm, good man!

As she rode nearer she saw that her jest was understood, for there came a muffled burst of laughter from the big sturdy fellow, in a leather jerkin and armed to the teeth, who stood inside the wicket.

"Can I have audience of my Lady Arundell?" she asked. "I am Mistress Damerel of Sutton Place."

She put as much haughtiness into her tone and manner as her draggled condition would permit, while she stood waiting outside the great iron-studded gates, with her small escort around her. The guardian of the castle, now quite reassured, made a deep bow and drew back. In a few minutes the portcullis was slowly raised and the inner gates swung back, creaking on their hinges. Then the visitors rode in across the broad open courtyard, with a great clanking of hoofs on the wet,

"'Let this teach you to insult a lady on the highway'"

slippery cobble-stones. Leaving Giles and Gideon to see to the horses, the young people were thankful to find a shelter from the storm, as they passed in under the deep archway. A few minutes later they were ushered into the stately hall, wainscoted with dark oak, hung with old armour and trophies of the chase, while the upper end was occupied with a carved staircase which led to the minstrels' gallery.

In their present condition, however, they all turned with most interest to the huge open fireplace, with flaming logs, under the massive sculptured stone chimneypiece. Two great deerhounds were stretched out at their ease in the genial warmth, and Cynthia was dimly conscious of a group of strangers, who looked askance at the newcomers in their dripping garments and sorry plight. She had not long to wait, however, before a white-haired serving-man, in gorgeous livery, brought her a message from the Lady Arundell, who would receive her at once.

She followed him up the broad polished staircase, with little Paul clinging to her hand, for he was so tired and fretful, poor child, that she alone could comfort him. At the head of the landing a heavy velvet curtain was drawn aside, and she found herself in the summer parlour, which seemed to bring back vague memories of the past. Surely in bygone days, as a little girl by her mother's side, she had been awed by that same magnificence of painted ceiling and hangings of tapestry, of chairs cushioned with Cordovan leather stamped with gold, and inlaid cabinets with choice works of art. Yet of all this she was but conscious with a dim, shadowy impression to-day, for her glance went straight as an arrow towards the stately dame who rose from the carved high-backed chair to meet her. Her silvery-grey hair was drawn back from her calm smooth forehead into a coif of lace and satin, and she wore a full skirt of rich flowered silk damask, of a deep purple, a long peaked bodice fastened in front with double clasp diamonds, and rare old lace hanging over her delicate wrists.

Her dark piercing eyes glanced out from under raised eyebrows, in questioning surprise; these were strangers to her. The girl flushed in mute confusion, then remem-

bering her manners, she made a deep curtsey, and said modestly :

" May it please you, Madam, to call to mind your kinswoman, Dame Pamela Damerel, late of Sutton Place ? I am her daughter Cynthia."

A flash of recognition passed over the face of Lady Blanche, and lighted it up like a gleam of sunshine. She came forward, holding out both hands in eager welcome.

" My dear child ! This is indeed a joy unlooked for. 'Tis so long since we met, and a great sorrow lies athwart the past. Yet I could have sworn that 'twas your mother's very image before me, as I first remember her. But tell me, what brings you unattended ? Or perchance your father is below ? "

It was less the words, than the tone in which they were spoken, which brought home to Cynthia the enormity of her conduct. How could she explain that she had defied all precedent, and, in a fit of rebellion, had come without leave on this wild adventure ? Yet that searching look, kindly as it was, compelled an answer.

" My father is away at Chelsea, and my stepmother set off on a journey this morning, and . . . I have come to ask if Nurse Jennifer is here ? My brother Godfrey bears me company."

Even at that critical moment the girl was too loyal to justify herself by casting blame on others. But Lady Arundell, with shrewd instinct, saw there was something wrong, and generously came to the rescue.

" You shall tell me all by-and-by, my Cynthia, when you have had the rest and refreshment you need after so stormy a ride. And this dear little boy, he must have a cup of hot peppermint - water and be tenderly cared for. Cecily, my dear," she added, turning to a young and richly dressed lady who sat by with her embroidery, " take these friends of mine to your chamber and see that they have all they need. You are much of a height, and maybe you can lend Cynthia a suitable gown for this evening, when we will have gay doings in her honour."

" Nay, but indeed, madam," pleaded the girl, " I may not tarry when the rain doth cease. If I can first have word with Nurse Jennifer, I shall have gained the purpose of my journey. She is daughter to the smith now in your employ. Afterward, with your gracious leave, madam, we will take horse and ride home at once, for the way is long."

" Be advised by me, dear child," said her friend. " In such a tempest, and with the day drawing to a close, you have no choice but to abide here the night. I will cause search to be made for Enoch Moleyn's daughter, and a messenger shall be despatched at once to Sutton Place, that he may bear tidings of your well-being."

The young girl gave one wistful glance towards the great bay window of stained glass, against which the storm still beat heavily. Then she looked down at little Paul, who was clinging to her with cold trembling fingers, and quietly sobbing to himself, overcome with fatigue and excitement.

Yes, my Lady Arundell spoke but the sober truth. It would be impossible to return home that night, and she began to realise, with a first sudden touch of remorse, that this adventure promised to be far more serious than she had ever dreamed of.

CHAPTER V

So free from danger, free from fear,
They crossed the court—right glad they were

CYNTHIA followed her companion with weary steps ; her wet garments hung round her in heavy folds, and it was all she could do to support and comfort the tired child who clung to her. But, as she passed the corner of the gallery which looked down into the great sombre hall, she suddenly remembered that the two young men were waiting below.

" Madam, my brother and his friend attend the pleasure of my Lady Arundell," she began.

" We will make them welcome without delay," was the eager rejoinder, as her guide led the way down the carved oak staircase.

James Randolph was the first to notice the approach of the strange lady, and came forward to meet her with a low courtly bow.

" I would pray my gracious hostess to pardon me for thus thrusting my presence here. I have no shadow of claim to set foot within these hospitable walls, but Mistress Damerel will explain that I have but followed in her train, unforeseen events having led me to join her escort."

Some shaft of insight pierced the girl's utter ignorance of social barriers, and she suddenly felt that it was very awkward to account for her bringing this unknown cavalier. She paused, with unwonted bashfulness, and flushed scarlet as she hastily exclaimed:

"Madam Cecily, we met this gentleman on the road hither, and he came to my rescue . . . he is a friend of my father's, and was on his way to Sutton Place."

The young man was quick to see her embarrassment, and quietly took up the thread of the story.

"'Tis only just that in these troublous times, Madam, you should have clear knowledge of those you harbour beneath your roof. My name is James Randolph, and my home is in the far-off colony of Virginia, beyond the seas, whither my father sought his fortune long since, when my Lord Delawarr was governor, of whom perchance you may have heard?"

"I have heard of Virginia," said young Madam Arundell eagerly. "My father, Sir Henry Compton, was half minded at one time to set forth to that distant land, where, said he, he might dwell in peace and hear no more rumours of oppression. You are doubly welcome, Master Randolph, and we shall pray you to beguile our leisure by telling us of that favoured land. And your brother is with you too?" she added, turning to the young girl.

"Oh yes, he is yonder, playing with those boys. Godfrey," she cried, "come and pay your respects to Madam Arundell, the wife of my lady's son."

He was received most graciously, with the smiling remark:

"I see that you have already made friends with my sons! Thomas," she added, speaking to the elder of the two, a handsome lad of about nine years old, "conduct these gentlemen to your quarters, and see that they have all things needful found for them. They will honour us by remaining our guests. Come, Cynthia, we must tarry no longer, for this poor child is shivering."

She bent down and kissed little Paul, then lifting a heavy curtain, she led the way beyond it, down a passage and up a winding staircase, the direct way to the sleeping rooms. As they passed round a dusky corner, Paul suddenly exclaimed:

"Look, Sissy, there be a little maid up yonder!"

It was quite true. Perched up in the recess of an oriel window was a small elf-like girl, with a white face framed in wavy dark curls. She had a book lying open on her knee, and a big tabby cat was nestling up close to her side.

"Ah, yes," said Madam Arundell in a low voice, "'tis my little Cicely, who ever loves to find a lonely corner and dream of saints and angels. You must coax her to play with you to-morrow, my little man, but we may not linger now."

With a nod and a smile to the child, who looked up for a moment with great wistful eyes, the young mother passed on into the state bed-chamber with its great canopied bed and rich embroidered hangings of crimson brocade. The walls were covered with valuable pictures, mostly portraits of sacred subjects by Italian artists, or portraits of bygone Arundells. There were inlaid cabinets, black mahogany presses, and various carved oak chests of marvellous workmanship. Chairs of quaint device were covered with rare needlework, and a rich Turkey-wrought carpet was spread on the polished floor.

Facing the ebony kneeling desk with its sumptuous "Book of Hours," hung an exquisite crucifix of carved ivory, the work of Michael Angelo, presented by Pope Leo X. to an ancestor of the family, a faithful son of the Church.

"This is my lady mother's room, and mine is next adjoining; then comes the blue guest chamber, and the sleeping chamber for our women lies beyond," explained Cecily Arundell as she led the way into a somewhat smaller room, also with a stately bed and rich hangings and furniture.

Two women stood in the doorway, in eager talk.

"Ah, there is my tiring-woman waiting for me, but who is that with her? Sure 'tis old Enoch Moleyn's daughter—the news of your coming must have spread like wildfire!"

But Jennifer had already turned at the sound of footsteps, and hurried forward to meet her young mistress. A few breathless words of greeting, and she had taken little Paul away to the care he so sorely needed.

Then Cecily Arundell turned to the maid.

"See to it that Mistress Damerel changes her wet garments as quick as may be, and Nan, methinks my flowered tabby suit of blue, with the bodice front of silver brocade, will become the young lady well. I will give orders to make ready the blue guest-chamber. You will lie safely, lodged next to me, dear Cynthia," she added with a pleasant smile.

Nan was inwardly delighted to have this fair young girl to deck out, and determined to do her work thoroughly. She brushed out the long golden hair and wove it up in radiant coils high on the head, according to some new-fangled way. Then she fitted on the full skirt of pale blue flowered silk, which hung with easy grace on the slim figure and touched the ground. The pointed bodice opened over a front of embroidered silver, and the sleeves were looped up with pearl studs, leaving the arms bare from the elbow. There were dainty high-heeled shoes with rosettes to match, and a string of seed pearls round the white neck completed the costume.

Taking Cynthia's hand, Madam Cecily presently led her to a low cushioned settle by the open hearth, where the flames were now leaping up, and splashing with ruddy light the oak panelling and the dim pictures on the walls.

"Now, dear child, tell me your story. Was the quiet life at home so tedious that you must needs come forth to seek adventures? Were you so poor in friends that you had no one to counsel or advise you? I know, dear, that you have missed a tender mother's love to guard and shield you."

There was something so constraining in the sympathy of this soft-eyed woman that Cynthia soon found herself, almost unconsciously, telling all the everyday details of her simple life, which had no mystery, no reservations.

With tender sympathy, the older woman listened to this young creature, this radiant child with her light heart and clear joyous eye, who craved for space and air and freedom, and, strangest thought of all, who had reached the very brink of womanhood all unknowing.

They spoke long together; Cecily full of the terrible war, of her husband far away, in hourly peril of his life.

"A messenger may come at any moment with news of battle, and a mere passing word to say that my Henry is amongst the slain, that the light of my life is darkness for evermore. . . .

"Dim rumours of fighting reach us from afar, and I lie sleepless through the night watches," she added in a low voice, "knowing that out upon the roads, in the woods and fields, the wounded are lying in their agony, under the calm moonlight, that far from kith and kin the souls of brave men are flitting. And I am not alone in my suspense; only one of many anxious wives and mothers. Look at my Lady Blanche. She has yielded up both husband and son to the cause. My Lord Arundell has spent his substance, has ruined his health in the King's service, and now has left his wife here in a post of untold danger. Yet how brave, how strong she is! Her bright smile brings sunshine into the darkest day, and she is the very life of us all. The children go to share their merry play with her, secure of her never-failing sympathy, while often 'tis as much as I can do to check my tears.

"You would think in such moments that she had never a care. But oh, Cynthia! if you catch her unawares, sitting at her tapestry maybe, when a woman forgets herself, you see the inward grief steal out into the transparent face, and you know what a hero soul is there."

There was silence in the darkening chamber, and long weird shadows from the flickering firelight crept softly over the ceiling, like strange fantasies. As the girl idly watched them, with dim wistful eyes, it seemed to her that old things were melting away and a new undreamed-of world was opening out before her.

Suddenly the loud peal of a bell rang out from below, and echoed through the passages.

"How the time has fled, my Cynthia! 'Tis already the supper hour."

CHAPTER VI

The merry dance, traced fast and light . .
The banquet and the song.

WHEN Cynthia came down into the great hall with Madam Cecily, most of the family

party were already assembled round the open wood fire, as the evening was raw and chilly. The storm was not yet over, for the rain could still be heard beating against the windows, and the evening dusk had closed in early.

Godfrey, who was standing nearest the door, started back in amazement at the sight of this grand court lady, and indeed hardly recognised his sister in her borrowed plumes.

"Fine feathers make fine birds!" he whispered, as he made her a low jesting bow.

She laughingly replied, as she looked him up and down: "You have no cause to mock at me, for I see that you too have gone a-borrowing!"

"Ah well, you know, Sissy, 'twas a rare bit of good luck for me that our friend Randolph had his wearing apparel on his man's packhorse. He had no need to be beholden to any one himself, and has done me good service too."

The girl looked round, and James Randolph was by her side, in a black velvet coat and white satin doublet, which she thought became him mightily. From the moment of her entrance he had never taken his eyes off her, and could not yet persuade himself that this beautiful woman, in her modish evening dress, was none other than the madcap girl who had been his companion through the varied adventures of the day's journey. His first impulse was to regret the change, and to sigh for the loss of the sprightly maiden who had been the very life of the little company.

But a nearer view showed the mischief which still lurked in her eye, and he found comfort in the assurance that this was but a passing masquerade, and that on the morrow she would stand revealed once more in changeless youth and joy.

"I am much in your debt, Mistress Damerel, for bringing me in your train to these hospitable walls," he remarked with grave politeness.

"Any refuge in a storm would be welcome," was the light reply.

"Nay, in that I cannot hold with you, Madam; but I would gladly welcome the storm which drives me to such a haven. Indeed, 'tis an ill wind that blows no one good, for I doubt if my little friend Paul could have braved the journey home, even in fair weather. The poor child was very weary!"

"Yes, truly. But for his share in this adventure I am not wholly to blame! He is in good hands now, for to his great content I have left him with my dear Jennifer. What troubles me most is the fear lest, by any means, his mother should have word of his loss, and be in sore trouble!"

"On that score, Mistress Damerel, you may set your mind at rest. Godfrey and I duly considered the matter, and have sent word to your man to return home to-night as soon as the storm is abated with news of your safe-keeping, and to announce your speedy return."

"I am much in your debt, sir; but, hush, here cometh my Lady Arundell," she added in a whisper.

The supper-table was set out at the higher end of the hall, lighted with wax candles in silver stands and sconces against the wall. There was a fine display of gold and silver plate, and quite a stream of serving-men in gay livery were staggering in under the weight of the great steaming dishes.

As the hostess took her place on a raised seat at the head of the table, with stately courtesy she invited her guests to take the place of honour on either side of her. Thus James Randolph found himself seated on her right hand, with Cynthia and her brother opposite to him. Next to him was Madam Cecily, and farther down her two young sons, Thomas and Henry. The rest of the company seemed to consist of several ladies in attendance, mostly poor relations, and some young men of good family, who had come as pages to learn courtly manners in a nobleman's family. Below the salt were other more humble guests, who held posts of trust and importance in the household.

In the intervals of carving, which was no light task, the Lady Blanche asked the young Virginian various questions about his home, in which she appeared to take much interest.

"Your name seems familiar to me," she remarked. "There were Randolphs near my old home. I do remember, too, how in those long bygone years, 'twas when I was newly wed, there was much stir about that first settlement of Virginia. Rumours of wild adventure and shipwreck on those stormy seas nigh to the fabled Bermudas reached our ears. But, above all, the

romantic tale of the Indian princess Pocahontas pleased me well."

Randolph smiled. "Indeed, 'tis vastly entertaining! But all this took place long before my father sailed to the colony with my Lord Delawarr, who was appointed governor, and was of much service to him."

"Tell me something about your home beyond the seas. Is it a wild and savage region?"

"Nay, Madam; 'tis a fair land of woods and forests, and broad rivers, and hills, and fertile plains. My father's goodly dwelling is built after the fashion of his old manor-house in Dorset, and has much store of rich hangings and carven furnishing from England. Moreover, his native country has still so large a share of his love that he hath sent me, his only son, hither to follow in his youthful steps, and seek to gain some old-world learning at Cambridge."

"You have fallen on troubled times for your visit, my young friend, and I fear me that your place of study was not well chosen, being ill-affected." She paused and looked her inquiry, but the young man's only answer was a bow of assent.

It was impossible for him, at such a time and place, to enter into a full discussion of his political views, which indeed in those days were very vague and unformed. As a stranger from another hemisphere he felt himself to be a mere looker-on at the struggle, which had only recently merged into open warfare between the King and the Parliament, and he had friends on both sides.

Lady Arundell took no notice of his silence, and continued in a low voice:

"Yes, the horizon is dark with the storm-clouds of war. The civil strife is thickening around us, and one knows not what a day may bring forth. My Lord Arundell is with the King at Oxford; my son, too, is fighting for the cause of his Majesty, and you see me here in command of our garrison—this present company, and a matter of fifty serving-men and retainers, mostly of advanced years, who have grown grey in our service."

"But surely, Madam, all the laws of chivalry would forbid any attack upon you, under such circumstances," was all that James Randolph could find to say.

Even as he spoke, he had suddenly realised what peril there might be; this was no mere dwelling-house, but a well-known fortified place, and he knew that there were armed troops in the neighbourhood. His hostess may have read his thought, for she gave him one keen glance and quickly changed the subject.

"Our talk is too grave for this festive scene and is but a poor welcome for my guests. How can we give you a merry evening? What say you, Cynthia? Shall we have music, or maybe a dance, and turn these gay young cavaliers to account?"

The girl's shy, eager smile was answer enough. She was enjoying herself immensely. Everything was so new and strange and delightful. The pleasant company, the bright lights, and the rich gay costumes in which matter she was able to hold her place, as in her girlish vanity she was well aware.

The supper was to her a sumptuous feast, with many rare dishes which were unfamiliar, and delicate confectionery in quaint erections of ships and mimic castles, and sundry devices which it was a pleasure even to look at. She had lived such a simple, quiet life at home that it was an amusement to watch the show and ceremony of the service; the sparkle of red wine in the dainty glass goblets, the shimmer and rustle of satin, the play of light and shadow on laughing faces: even the very noise and bustle was an added joy.

When the meal was ended, the more favoured members of the company withdrew to my lady's summer parlour, where she kept her spinet and other instruments of music, that they might beguile the time while the serving-men cleared the tables in the hall below.

Madam Cecily played some Italian airs with light delicate touch, some one else sang a plaintive ballad, then the guests were invited to show their skill. James Randolph did his part manfully. In a fine deep voice, though possibly with more natural taste than trained science, he gave the favourite song:

> Amaryllis I did woo,
> And I courted Phyllis too,
> Daphne for her love I chose,
> Chloris for that damask rose. . .

"You have done well to warn the ladies, Master Randolph," said the Lady Arundell, with a meaning smile, as he came to an end.

"They will be proof against such a fickle lover."

Did she give a passing glance at Cynthia? Or was it the girl's fancy which played her false? Quick to scent danger in the air, the young man made a deep bow, and carrying on the jest, replied:

"Then perchance, Madam, if by my changing taste I have given umbrage to fair ladies I had best make amends by singing a farewell ditty."

Without a moment's pause his strong young voice rang out cheerily with:

Come, spur away,
I have no patience for a longer stay. . .

And so to the finish, at which there was much merry applause, and if there was also any blushing confusion it passed unnoticed.

"You next, Godfrey," whispered his sister; and, after some persuasion, he came out, in his boyish tones, with a popular new school song, set to the tune of "Green Sleeves."

Pray lend me your ear, if you've any to spare,
You that love Commonwealth as you hate Common Prayer,
That can in a breath pray, dissemble, or swear;
Which nobody can deny.

"Which nobody can deny!" rang out the emphatic chorus, in which everybody joined heartily.

By this time Cynthia had quite recovered her composure, and willingly consented to play some airs on a choice lute, for which, some one whispered, my Lord Arundell had given a hundred pounds, as a wedding present to his son's wife.

The girl tuned the strings and began in some trepidation, for never before had she performed in the hearing of such an audience. But as her sensitive fingers crept over the strings there came forth such exquisite notes that she forgot everything else in the pure joy of melody. With a dreamy smile she gave herself up to the delight of handling such a rare instrument, and played remembered airs with an engaging sweetness which swept through the room like a shower of silver drops.

Then softly, as from a far-off distance, came the low melody, drawing ever nearer and swelling forth in strength and beauty, till every ear was captive, and hung on the sweet sounds with mute enchantment, scarce conscious of the moment when, in falling cadence, they died away.

The music ceased, and the player came to herself suddenly abashed, not by loud applause but by the subtler homage of silence.

"You have been well taught, dear child," said Lady Arundell, clasping her hand with delicate kindness. "Where did you learn to play the lute after this fashion?"

"Master Henry Lawes was my teacher," replied Cynthia simply. "He is a friend of my father, and his kinsfolk live at Dinton near us, so that he is often with them and never fails to give me a lesson."

"He has an apt pupil. Will you give us more of your pleasant music, dear?"

She readily consented, but now the charm was broken. An old music-book, of "Ayres to sing and play to the Lute and Bass Viol, 1610," was lent her, and she chose a few lighter tunes which pleased the ear, but had no power to touch the heartstrings of her hearers. The girl had become aware of her self-betrayal.

After this, all the company joined in singing the familiar catch:

Jog on, jog on the footpath way,
And merrily hent the stile a;
Your merry heart goes all the way
Your sad tires in a mile a!

This was the end of the music, for by this time the banquet had been removed and the table put back to make room for the dance. The musicians had already been warned, and started off with sprightly tunes in the minstrels' gallery. The air of "Peg-a-Ramsey" was the first, and this the dancers accompanied with their voices, as they went through the stately measure of the contre-dance. Not since the days of their childhood had Cynthia and Godfrey taken part in such frivolous delights, but they were quick to follow the lead of others and keep step and time with them.

The Lady Arundell herself led off the first dance and James Randolph had the honour of being her partner, but after this ceremonious measure he was free to devote a very full share of his attention to Cynthia in the gay scene which followed. They were already friends. Their long day of travel and adventure, in which they had been so closely thrown together, had forged a strong

"Young Randolph obeyed with a ready smile"

link between them. But now they saw each other in a new and most attractive light, as old acquaintances and companions united by a secret bond of fellow feeling in the midst of strangers.

They were both conscious of having reached a point of intimacy which, under other circumstances, might have been of slow growth.

"Master Randolph, I fear you must think me a wild madcap thus to play truant, and lead you into such an unlooked-for adventure," said the girl.

They had arrived at a figure in the contre-dance when they two stood alone at one end of the hall, with arms upraised, waiting for the dancers to pass under them.

"Indeed I am much beholden to you, Mistress Cynthia. How otherwise should I have had the privilege to hear that enchanting melody on the lute?" was the low reply.

The young girl flushed with delight, though she asked herself: "Did he really love music, or was this merely a courteous speech?"

She remembered afterwards that she never had any answer to this knotty question. For the music struck up loudly to mark the time when, all the partners having passed under, hand in hand, it only remained for her to follow the line of ladies on the one side, while Randolph passed behind the men on the other, and so in the mazy dance they two were soon far asunder.

CHAPTER VII

She loved me for the dangers I had passed;
And I loved her that she did pity them.

ALAS, the delights of that festal evening were all too soon overshadowed by a great fear. Before midnight little Paul was seized with a sudden stroke of illness, and Cynthia, roused in alarm, found him struggling for breath and almost at the last gasp.

It was indeed fortunate that Jennifer was lodged near at hand, and being skilled in nursing knew how to treat the deadly croup, which had more than once before threatened the child's life.

The night was one long anxious vigil, but when once more the white light of morning poured in through the mullioned window the crisis was over, and for the moment little Paul was saved. The hovering Angel of Death, who had passed so close in the night that his icy breath had chilled the very life-blood, seemed to have spread his wings and taken his flight.

But the boy had not escaped from the dread ordeal unscathed. He looked so pale and fragile in the cold gleam of day that Cynthia gave up all thought of going home. Full of kindly sympathy, Lady Arundell had paid the sick child a visit, and from the depth of her experience had given a peremptory command that for some days he must be

kept perfectly quiet. She was the very soul of hospitality, and warmly expressed her satisfaction in keeping all the young people with her.

"Indeed, my dear child, you will be doing us a great favour," she said, with her calm smile. "It has been an unlooked-for joy to renew my knowledge of you for your mother's sake, and as for my grandsons, they are wild with delight at having some young companions, for theirs has been too much of a cloistered and narrow life."

Now that the danger was over, Godfrey could scarcely hide his content at the thought of prolonging this delightful visit. The movement, the life of a big household was so new and inspiriting to him, while the men-at-arms, the cannon, the muskets and all the warlike defences of a fortified castle were of intense interest to the lad, who came of a race of soldiers. He and Randolph had risen at daybreak and found their way to the armoury, and he was eager to tell his sister of all that he had learnt from old Enoch Moleyns.

But she could only give a half-hearted attention to his story, for her whole soul was wrapped up in the child whose life had so lately trembled in the balance.

"As we must needs bide here, Godfrey, I cannot be too thankful that we sent Giles home with a message last evening. Now, in case of Madam's sudden return, she will learn that her boy is in safe keeping."

There was an awkward silence, and as the girl caught the shame-faced expression in her brother's glance, suspicion flashed across her mind.

"Surely Giles is gone?" she asked sharply.

"Don't be angered with me, Sissy, for 'tisn't my fault," he pleaded. "I sought the fellow at once, and found him in the guard-room, drying himself in the great chimney corner, while some jovial serving-men were plying him with strong drink to 'keep out the cold,' forsooth! He promised that he would take horse and set off so soon as the storm abated. . . ."

"Well, and what then?" asked Cynthia, with her clear merciless gaze full upon him.

"In sooth, dear Sissy, I was loath to trouble you with the scurvy tale. Not till we were a-bed did Randolph's man bring us word that he had left Giles stretched like a log, dead drunk on the rush-strewn floor. To do them justice, Gideon and his master would have set off there and then to bear the message, but I would not hear on't."

The girl's eyes blazed with wrath and, like most young creatures, she was pitiless and unsparing.

"The cowardly varlet! The weak fool!" she cried. "To think that our honour and trust should rest on such as he! I will speak to Giles this instant, and take upon me to dismiss him from my father's service."

"Can I do aught for you, Mistress Damerel?" asked a familiar voice, and

"Cynthia had taken a seat in the window nook"

turning, she found herself face to face with James Randolph.

The brother and sister had been speaking apart from the rest of the company, half hidden by the heavy folds of arras hung across the archway of the great hall. Now, although this masterful young woman knew that she did well to be angry, she had a curious desire to justify herself in the eyes of this stranger.

"You have heard of our serving-lad's shameful conduct?" she exclaimed eagerly. "All my wishes set at nought, my message delayed when it was of such vital importance? He has sinned past forgiveness!"

Was it the shadow of a smile which flitted across the young man's face before he gravely replied?

"I have this moment seen the hapless Giles and started him on his journey. He is crushed with shame for his misdoing. If I might be suffered to plead for him I would say that he is young and ignorant, and maybe had never before tasted those strong Geneva waters. The blame lies greatly with his jovial companions who urged him on. But I pray you, mistress, waste no more thought on him. Tell me how is my little friend Paul? I was sorely troubled to hear of his illness."

"The chirurgeon bids me hope that the danger is overpast for the moment," said the girl in a changed tone; "but the poor child is restless and fretful. 'Tis no easy task to keep him a-bed, and I must go back to him."

"May I help to amuse him?" asked her friend. "I have seen somewhat of sick folks, and know how long and heavily the hours creep by."

"I never knew the boy take to any one as he did to you," interposed Godfrey. "Surely, Sissy, we may go and see him?"

Cynthia gladly consented and led the way up by the winding staircase to the blue guest-chamber. On the threshold she was greeted by a moaning complaint:

"Why did 'ee bide away so long, Sissy? I be a-wearying for thee!"

"Aye, pore little lamb," said Jennifer, who had risen from her seat, "he do sob an' cry, an' won't let me do nought for'n. 'Tis ever Sissy, Sissy!"

But the child's quick ear had now caught the sound of other footsteps on the polished floor. He turned his big wistful eyes towards the door, and a sudden gleam of joy lighted up his pale face.

"Why, 'tis my dear Jem!" he cried, for so his friend had bid the child call him. "Do 'ee come and sit down nigh me, and tell me more about the badgers and the wild cats, and the hunting, and all you did when you was a little boy like me," commanded the small tyrant imperiously.

Young Randolph obeyed with a ready smile, and took Jennifer's place while she drew back into a shadowed corner. Her fingers were busy with her knitting, but her shrewd wit was taking in the whole scene and drawing strange conclusions.

Cynthia had taken a seat in the window nook, and sat watching with expectant eyes, ready to drink in every word, like some rare strain of unwonted music. As for Godfrey, after lingering a few minutes, he seemed to come to the conclusion that he was not wanted, and sauntered off, with his hands in his pockets, murmuring an idle tune below his breath.

"Shall I tell you what I did this morning, young sir, to begin with?" asked Randolph. "We were up at daybreak, your brother and I, and we went to the armoury and saw the gunsmith at work, with his great red forge, where the sparks fly up like showers of stars when he strikes the hot iron. You must get well quick and come with me to see these wonderful things, and maybe there will be tennis in the courtyard, and stool-ball for you and the boys."

Little Paul grasped the strong brown hand of his friend and held it tight in his thin white fingers. His eyes sparkled with eagerness, but he persisted in his first appeal.

"Oh yes, that will be fine. But tell me about your big woods and all the wild creatures as bide over the seas, where you be come from."

Nothing loath, the young Virginian went on with the exciting story he had told to beguile the long ride, and which had won the heart of the boy, who looked up to him as a hero.

"When I was your age, Paul, it seems to me that I must have been the happiest lad in all the world. My life was like one long summer day, as I look back upon it. There was the great shining river close at hand,

never weary, never still; calling me with its whispering voice, sharing all my joy, until it grew to be my living playfellow. If I close my eyes I can hear even now the splash and ripple, and feel the yielding waters in which I was wont to bathe and swim and dive.

"Aye, and as the years passed on there came the fishing, the boating, and endless delights which no custom could stale. Never since have I seen such silvery glittering fish as those won by my own line, and my first boat, with its white sail and flying pennon, lives in my memory as a thing of beauty."

"Then you went a-hunting and a-birding too, Jem," murmured Paul, like one who having tasted, if only by hearsay, the keen excitement of killing, found all other sport tame.

The young man's face lighted up with a merry gleam, and his grey-blue eyes sparkled as he tossed back the curls from his open face.

"You young Nimrod!" he laughed. "Will nothing short of the chase, and the fighting for dear life, and the shedding of blood, content thee?"

Conscious all the while of another listener he would have chosen gentler themes, but to please the child he went back to the ever-stirring tales of sport and adventure. He told of all the wonderful creatures which had their home in the far-off primeval land, that wild Virginian forest. In vivid words he pictured the long stealthy chasing of huge bustards, in which there was need of hawk and spaniel, both well inured and taught together for that purpose.

"'Tis a marvellous fine sight, a flock of those great birds, bigger than turkeys, of a greenish-yellow, on the open verge of a wood. They do always place one as a sentinel at some distance from their camp, that giveth notice to the rest of any danger. When startled, they run with great speed, beating their wings before they fly to another haunt, often six or seven miles away. And in these great flights, I can tell you, we need all our care and diligence. But when we bring home our spoils 'tis a rare dish, sweet and well-flavoured."

"I should love to see a bustard!" cried the boy.

"Maybe you will, even in the old country, for they be still often met with in these parts, on the open plains about Salisbury. Badgers too you have, but not the same kind or so plentiful as with us. We hunt them on bright moonlight nights, when they go abroad for food. The best season is in the spring, after they wake up from their winter sleep, and are fat and in good case.

"But all this is poor tame sport when compared with the hunting of the grey fox, and the yellow-breasted marten for his precious fur, and perilous hair-breadth escapes in pursuit of fierce wild cats, or climbing the sheer side of a rocky precipice to capture the eagle in her nest."

The hunter paused for a moment, until the child's eager whisper broke the silence. "Tell me all about the fighting with the wild men."

"Will nothing less content you, my lad?" asked the speaker with a smile.

After this the story passed on to more deadly earnest. He told of sharp warfare with the Indians in the earlier days of the colony, of their poisoned arrows and savage customs, of burning homesteads, of treachery and revenge. Then with kindling eye he spoke of the English settlers, of their gallant deeds, their mortal peril, their undying courage and well-earned success. From his own experience the young traveller had thrilling tales to tell of sea as well as of land.

On his voyage to the old country, the home of his ancestors, he had met with a fearful tempest on the rough seas by the stormy Bermudas, when the pinnace was tossed hither and thither, and well-nigh made shipwreck on that rocky coast, with her precious freight of human life and costly merchandise.

Then in one last burst of enthusiasm, forgetful of all but the vision in his soul, he cried:

"O Paul, if you could but see my dear home in Virginia! The goodly manor-house, built of English birch, with a gallery round it half-hidden by the clustering grape-vine, and tangled roses and morning glory! Broad sunny windows looking out on a land of woods and forests, of rivers and fertile plains and gentle hills. If I could show you that peaceful homestead, where the warm red soil glows beneath the green lances of Indian corn, the cock quail is piping amid the sassafras bushes, the fireflies flash over the sparkling fields, and every-

where is the spicy scent of the hemlock and the cedar!

"Yes, there is my home, the one place in all the world for me, where my dear father and mother look out with wistful eyes towards the east, and wait for my coming. . . ."

The last words were spoken in a low deep voice of suppressed feeling and were scarcely audible, but they woke a responsive thrill in one listening heart. James Randolph had seemed to tell his story to little Paul, but in very truth his winged words had been aimed at another target. All the time he was intensely awake to that silent presence, the girlish figure dimly outlined against the stained glass of the window.

It was to Cynthia he spoke, and she knew it. Some instinct told her that all that fervour of description would scarcely have been poured out only for the ear of a sick child. So entranced was she that she had never moved, but sat there leaning forward, with her slim hands clasped on her knee, her eyes sparkling with excitement, and her sweet lips slightly parted as her breath softly came and went.

Suddenly, by some strange freak of memory, there was mirrored in the mind of Randolph a certain play which he had once seen acted at Cambridge: "The Story of Othello the Moor, writ by one Will Shakespeare." Yes, that was how Othello won his Desdemona! He did but tell an unvarnished tale,

> The story of his life from year to year,
> Of moving accident by flood and field,
> Of hairbreadth 'scapes. . . .

Oh, if only that same process might have the same result now! If she would but swear 'twas passing strange, 'twas passing strange, and if he could but so tell his story that it would woo her!

"Ah, good lack!" he sighed, "if I could but say, 'She loved me for the dangers I had passed, And I loved her that she did pity them.'"

Meantime, unseen and unheeded, the silent witness, Jennifer, sat knitting in the dusky corner. Her quick eyes lost no sign or glance, and from all she heard and all she saw it was little wonder that she built up a fair romance, and piecing together all the scraps of knowledge she had gathered, made therewith a strange tesselated pavement.

CHAPTER VIII

Case, case ye—on with your vizards.

THERE was a sound of hurrying footsteps on the staircase; the door of the blue guest-chamber was suddenly thrown open, and Godfrey Damerel stood on the threshold, flushed with excitement.

"Randolph! Cynthia! You little dream what is happening," he cried in a loud eager tone. "While you sit here spinning old-world yarns, the great war is closing in round us, and we shall be in the very heart of the strife!"

"What mean you, my dear lad?" exclaimed the young Virginian, starting to his feet and instinctively putting his hand to his belt. "Is the castle besieged?"

"Not yet, but 'tis like to be afore the day be much older!" replied the lad with a ring of triumph in his voice. "'Tis a rare piece of luck that we should be come here in the very nick of time."

"Rare luck, do you say, you foolish boy?" said Randolph indignantly. "Do you forget the awful peril for your sister, and for this poor child? Are you so ignorant of all the horrors of war that you look upon it as merely a merry game?"

"Oh, take no heed of me!" interrupted Cynthia impatiently. "But is it really true? Tell us quickly all you know, Godfrey."

"You daunt a fellow so," he grumbled. "'Tisn't worth while to bring you the biggest news that be ever like to come your way! Well, if you do want to hear the whole story, you'd best come down quick and have it all from Giles. There be troops of rebel soldiers outside the park, and 'twas all he could do to escape and bring word to the castle."

Master Godfrey looked round with much satisfaction to see the effect of this thunderbolt. Jennifer had started up from her secluded corner and thrown herself on her knees by little Paul's side, and was covering him with kisses.

"You pore little lamb!" she sobbed in her dismay, "doant 'ee be afeared. No bad men shall come anigh thee, my dearie!"

But all this comfort and pity was wasted,

for Paul clapped his hands in wild delight at the mere rumour of soldiers at hand.

"Come," said Cynthia, turning to James Randolph, and together they followed Godfrey down to the great hall in silence.

In the face of such overwhelming news it was idle to bemoan the persistent ill-fortune which had met all her efforts to send a message home; indeed, for the moment all was forgotten in the dark shadow of coming disaster.

The serving-lad was standing in the open doorway, looking very sheepish and uncomfortable, with a group of listeners round who bewildered him by their idle questions. The Lady Arundell had been hastily summoned to hear the tidings, and her stately, imperious manner only added to the confusion of the awkward country fellow.

"Ah, Cynthia, my child," she exclaimed with a smile of welcome, "can you prevail on your groom to tell a plain story that we can understand."

"I will try, Madam," said the girl in a low voice. Then she added aloud:

"Now, Giles, I want to hear how far you rode on your journey, and why you turned back."

"Aye, mistress, I'll tell 'ee to onst," he replied, much encouraged by the sight of a familiar face. "'Tis like this: I sets off dreckly minnit as old Enoch he'd a-shod Cap'n, as be a tar'ble one for casten of his shoes. Thinks I, us'll have a storm afore long, vor the fallow deer they was a-huddlen' agen the trees; an' Cap'n he doan't like the smell on em, zo 'twar all as I could do for to get droo the park.

"I had'n' got no more'n a hundred steps outside the big gates, when a red-haired chap comes a-tearen' along the road like as tho' a mad bull wur at his heels.

"'Hullo, you! where be a-going?' zays he.

"'Taint no consarn o' your'n,' zays I, 'but I be bound for Zutton Place.'

"'Then you'll never get there alive,' zays he. 'Vor the roads they be full o' sodgers, rebels, wuss luck! Down yonder copse a whole troop be a-lyen' in wait. Look 'ee, you can see the steel points a-shinen' mid the trees.'

"Sure enough, zo 'twas, and it give I a turn. But I axed, as bold as may be: 'An' where mid they be a-goin', they sodgers?'

"'You bean't a fool, young man,' says he, 'zo I'll tell 'ee all I knows. Me an' Jacob, that's my lad, us wur a-carten' a load o' kindlen' wood from Tisbury Common, an' not thinken' o' nothen', when there comes dree horsemen along, wi' muskets an' swords an' shinen' helmets an' long yaller boots, officers they mun a-ben. Zays one, a fine set-up man:

"'"Look 'ee, my good fellow, we do want a guide for to show us the way. Can 'ee spare thik there lad o' yourn?"

"'Then afore I can say a word, bein' all dazed-like, t' other sodger swings Jacob on to the saddle, an zays he to I, a pointen' to Tisbury:

"'"You'd best go back the way you comed; us doan't want no news to get to the castle," sharp and masterfu' like.

"'But, la' bless 'ee, I wur a match for 'n. I makes believe for to go, then I turns down a lane, an' leaves my old horse for to graze, an' creeps alongside o' the hedge for to hearken to em, for I be sharp o' hearen'.

"'My Jacob have a-got a big moon face, an' looks simple as a new-born babe, but he be a tar'ble liar. . . . They axed he no end o' things. Were they well prepared up to Wardour Castle? An' how many men-at-arms? An' was there good store o' provisions? an sech-like.

"'Now Jacob dunno nought, an' to hear the lies he told, I wur like to split! Then I slips off, an' takes a short cut, an' has the luck to meet wi' you,' zays he, 'an' as you be a-horseback, tho' it be a sorry jade, why, you'd best ride on an' tell my Lady.'

"So off he goes, an' here I be," ended Giles, in his own person, gasping and out of breath.

His long, rambling, queerly confused story had been broken by many pauses, and was a sore trial to the patience of his hearers. They would have worried him, and asked questions, and confused him until he lost the thread of the story, had not Cynthia been on the watch and sharply checked all interruption. She knew that the only chance of hearing what had happened was to let Giles tell it in his own rambling way.

Afterwards she acted as interpreter, and convinced Lady Arundell that the lad, stupid-looking lout as he might be, was

shrewd enough in some things, and perfectly honest and trustworthy.

"In truth, I quite believe the news, and it is no surprise to me," said the Lady Blanche. "I know well that the castle of Wardour is looked upon as a coveted stronghold, and in my dear lord's absence I am prepared to hold it for the King, as he earnestly enjoined me.

"So now to work, my good friends, there is not a moment to lose. My trusty steward will marshal each one to his post, for we may be attacked at any moment."

She was so calm and brave herself, that something of her spirit spread through all her household. There were pale faces and, maybe, fearful hearts amongst the women, but courage is infectious, and they gave no sign of weakness in public. Randolph and Godfrey, with the two Arundell boys, went off at once to the armoury, which was a scene of busy excitement, for the smiths were beset with appeals on all sides, and were glad of any help, if only to blow the great bellows of the forge.

There were endless matters to be seen to at the last moment; muskets and carbines, crossbows, partisans and the new-fashioned flint-lock pistols, all to be carefully examined, and lances, swords and pikeheads to be sharpened before they were set out for use.

The young Virginian, who had been accustomed to all kinds of handicraft in the colony, showed more skill than his companions, and was highly flattered when presently old Enoch picked him out with a nod of approval, and said, half in jest:

'Tell 'ee what, young measter! I'll lend 'ee a leathern apern, an' thee shall come along wi' I vor to oil the bolts, an' see to the chains, an' guns, an' sech-like."

"And so I will, my friend, and be proud to wear such a badge of honour," was the ready reply, which rang out cheerily above the din of hammer and anvil.

Yet it was no light task which they took in hand, nothing less than go all round the castle, inspect all the defences of every gate and door and barred window; see to the machinery which worked the portcullis, and last but not least, visit each cannon on top of the castle, lest they might have become rusty for want of use. There was one great wall-gun, called a "Harquebuz de Croq," which was specially interesting to young Randolph, though no one could tell him the origin of the name.

Meanwhile Cynthia had gone back to the blue guest-chamber and was pacing up and down like some caged animal. She could not leave little Paul, for Jennifer had gone to break the news to her blind mother, who was so infirm that she must be spared any shock. The girl was wild with impatience. When the very air around her was thrilling with excitement, which at any moment might rise to fever pitch, when she was craving to hear and see everything, to take her part in this coming drama of stirring life—here she was mewed up in a sick-chamber! And all because she was only a girl! a mere useless slip of womankind!

She stood up on the high window-seat and looked out. Down a wooded glade of the park below she could just distinguish her brother Godfrey and young Thomas Arundell, who were helping the herdsmen to drive some of the cattle into the courtyard of the castle. The boys were running and shouting, enjoying themselves thoroughly, and Cynthia would have given anything to join them.

"Do 'ee see the soldiers a-coming? Let me look too, Sissy dear," cried Paul eagerly, in childish delight at the prospect that something was going to happen.

"No, no, my darling, lie down. They are only driving the cows into the stable-yard to keep them safe."

"And will they bring in all the pretty stags too?" asked the child. "Jennifer telled me as there be lots of red deer and fallow deer too in the park."

"Oh, the deer will be quite safe, I fancy; no one will harm them," was the ready reply of youth and inexperience.

Surely these English soldiers, if they were rebels, yet need not be savages, and would do no wanton destruction. So thought the girl in her utter ignorance of all the horrors which war brings in its train.

There was a sound at the open door, a rustling of satin and the touch of high-heeled shoes on the polished floor. It was Lady Arundell herself who stood there, leading her little white-faced grandchild by the hand. In the midst of her own anxieties she had found leisure to think of her guests.

"I have brought a friend to sit with you and show you pictures of the saints," she said, bending down towards the boy with a

smile which brought the sunlight round his bed. "My little Cicely here; 'tis the dream of her life to nurse sick folk."

She left the children to break through the icy barrier of shyness for themselves. Cynthia was watching her with wistful eyes, and some instinct revealed to her hostess the young creature's restless excitement.

"Come with me," she said, looking full into the fair troubled face with a gaze of understanding sympathy. "You shall help me; I am going round to take note of the stores in case of a siege. Here are my keys to carry, and you will learn by the way somewhat of the ordering of a great household. 'Tis a sore burden at times, when age and sorrow overtake us."

The young girl was radiantly thankful for the merest semblance of usefulness. In times of suspense there is nothing so terrible as to stand idly by.

"I have already taken down from the house steward's book," said Lady Blanche, "the account of all the wheat and barley and oats which are stored in the granary, and also of the casks of beer and wine in the cellars. This I must take on trust somewhat, but I will see with mine own eyes the provision of salted mutton and corned beef still left in the meat-house, and we will count the pile of cheeses in the chamber next the dairy."

"That will be delightful!" cried Cynthia eagerly. "And shall we go to the still-room and see those wonderful treasures Jennifer told me of? The choice conserves of damson and quince and mulberry, and all the candied fruits; aye, and the rare herbs for use in sickness," she added hastily, that she might not seem to be utterly frivolous.

With a smiling assent, Lady Arundell led the way up and down by dark passages, through all the various store-rooms, across the great courtyard, giving a glance by the way into the brewhouse, until at length they reached the long vaulted kitchen. Here there was much to question about and examine, more especially the great gammons and flitches of bacon, which were hanging to smoke in the huge open chimney.

The head cook was in despair at the prospect of a coming siege, for a small personal reason of his own.

"Oh, my Lady, saving your presence, it do seem a tar'ble pity to think o' they big ponds full o' fish," he lamented, "an' if we be shut up, why, never a taste shall us get, for the salt fish was all eat up in Lent to-year. Doan't 'ee think now, my lady, as one an' t'other o' they young fo'k mid go an' set ground-bait i' the six-acre pond, an' bring we back a tidy few big carp vor to make fish-pies, afore the rebels do come?"

"Let me go," exclaimed Cynthia on the impulse of the moment; "I can cast a line with the best of them."

But the words had scarcely escaped her lips before she knew what a terrible mistake she had made. Lady Arundell simply looked at her in silent amazement and dismay, and seemed suddenly to realise how utterly the poor child's bringing-up must have been neglected. But fortunately at that moment some new arrivals created a diversion.

It happened that Enoch Moleyns, and young Randolph in attendance, had come as far in their round as the defences of the outer windows, and the smith struck one of the thick iron bars outside the kitchen grating to test it. Madam looked with amused approval at the young visitor in his grimy leathern apron.

"Sir, I thank you heartily for the labour you bestow upon us," she said graciously.

Then, as ill luck would have it, she took it into her head to ask:

"Think you not these massive walls, and well-tempered bars and bolts of ours, will keep out any foe?"

James Randolph bowed low, but there was an awkward pause before he replied:

"Madam, in the brave hearts of your household and retainers you will find your best defence."

Lady Arundell read his unspoken doubts. She was not one to endure contradiction, and was so deeply stung in the matter nearest to her heart that she forgot her usual courtesy. She exclaimed imperiously:

"Then, if you spoke your mind, young sir, you would make light of these ancient towers and all this store of goodly cannon and armoury, and doubtless bid us rely on your strong arm. On my word, every young spark nowadays sets himself up above his elders! Trust me, I will no more ask counsel of such as darkly prophesy evil."

Thereupon she turned away sharply, hiding her wounded pride in stately dignity. The

young Virginian stood watching her with startled surprise and dismay.

What more had courtesy required of him at the expense of truth? Had he dared to speak all that was in his mind, he would have said:

"Madam, your grand old castle has no modern defences to stand a siege against a determined enemy. Against their charge of powder and shot, their pitiless iron sleet, your bolts and bars will be of no avail, if there be not a strong body of armed men behind them!"

CHAPTER IX

Stand to it, noble pikemen,
And face ye well about,
And shoot, ye sharp, bold bowmen,
And we will keep them out.

IT is marvellous how soon we grow accustomed to anything. Only a few hours had passed since Giles brought news of the enemy's approach and already the first sharpness of expectation was blunted by delay.

Men and women went about their day's work, and life in the castle was going on almost as usual, when, suddenly, the flaring blast of a trumpet rent the air and woke the echoes of the woods. The note of defiance sent a thrill through every heart, for it told that the expected hour had come.

From her high casement window Cynthia could just catch sight of the troop of mounted soldiers riding up at a steady trot through the trees towards the great gateway. Their steel caps and iron breastplates, well burnished, made a brave show and glimmer in the sunlight; they carried ponderous muskets on their shoulders and seemed in terribly grim earnest. In the excitement of the moment the girl snatched up little Paul in her arms and lifted him up on the window-seat to see the gallant sight, at which he shouted with delight, for to him it was but a piece of rare pageantry.

But young mistress Cicely, who had been sitting demurely by his side showing him pictures, refused to rise and look out of the window with him.

"Little boy," she said gravely, "do you know those are wicked men who fight against the King, and they want to kill us all and take the castle of my grandfather?"

Paul looked down at her from his high perch with great wondering eyes, but he only remarked:

"What a pity you are a girl! But I won't let them kill you, for I can fight and take care of you!"

Again the trumpet sounded and this time with a longer and a shriller note, which seemed to pierce the castle walls with insolent triumph. Then came a long time of anxious suspense; horsemen coming and going, messages passing backwards and forwards, until at length the commotion ended and there was silence. A few minutes later, Godfrey Damerel burst into the chamber, breathless with haste, the bearer of stirring news.

"Sissy dear, my Lady Arundell says you may come down if you like and stand by her side. Make good haste, for I would not have you miss the show for worlds! She is about to grant an interview to Sir Edward Hungerford, the captain of the rebel forces, who has had the insolence to summon the castle to surrender. My Lady will receive him in the great hall with all her retinue round her, and we hope to give such an impression of our strength that he will withdraw his men."

"Why, Godfrey!" cried his sister, "what have you done to yourself? You look ten years older, and a real soldier!"

In truth the boy was scarcely to be recognised, equipped as he was in a complete suit of armour. He had on first a coat of thick buff leather dressed soft and pliant, and outside this was a breastplate and steel covering for the back and arms and thighs; he wore a shining headpiece over his yellow hair, and a silver-mounted sword hung from his bandolier.

Paul looked up with eager, admiring eyes, but little Cicely turned away demurely, and took up her "Book of Hours." Godfrey himself was radiant.

"All the men have been to the armoury to be fitted out," he explained. "You should see Randolph! He has chosen an old suit of black chain armour, that might have been to the Crusades. Ah, here comes Jennifer to mind the boy, so now, Sissy, you must be quick, for I can wait no longer."

But the girl paused a moment to smooth down her rebellious curls under a close black velvet coif, which framed her face like a pictured maiden in an old missal. Then she

"The sturdy, red-faced soldier . . . was somewhat taken aback by the calm, ceremonious reception"

threw her arms round Paul and gave a sudden capricious kiss to make amends for leaving him behind, and ran lightly after her more favoured brother, across the polished landing and down the shining, slippery staircase.

The two Damerels entered the presence-chamber hand in hand, and then Cynthia joined the circle of my Lady Arundell's attendants ranged in order behind her, while the boy took his place with the men-at-arms.

She was amazed to see such a goodly array of them, spread out on either side, for only afterwards did she learn that every serving-man about the place, down to the veriest turnspit and scullion, had been furbished up in some way to appear in warlike guise. She happened, indeed, to recognise Giles, her own stable-lad, for he clumsily let his sword fall with a great clash on the stone floor, and almost dropped his headpiece in trying to pick it up.

"You will never make a silk purse out of a sow's ear!" murmured a voice near her, which she fancied must have come out of the lips of the solemn black knight near her, in his chain armour.

Lady Blanche gave Cynthia a kindly look of encouragement.

"Ah, my child, when you rode gaily hither on a merry adventure, little did you dream that it would turn to such grim

earnest! But life hath ever such shrewd surprises," she sighed.

"Madam, if I can have you for my teacher and example, I deem it good fortune to have such schooling," was the low reply, which won a rich reward in a smile of rare sweetness and sympathy.

The brief interval of waiting soon came to an end, for the rebel captain was impatient to put a close to this farce, as he styled it. There was a stir at the doorway, a hum of subdued voices, and "Sir Edward Hungerford" was ushered in with much pomp by the groom of the chamber.

The sturdy, red-faced soldier, who came forward with a jaunty air, was somewhat taken aback by the calm, ceremonious reception which awaited him, and the stately inclination of the head with which the lady of the castle acknowledged his hurried bow. But he quickly recovered himself; for, with all this courtly show of power and affectation of ease, he was master here, and would make these Royalists feel it.

"Madam, my Lady Arundell," he began in a blustering voice. "Being in the command of the troops of Wilts, I have summoned this Castle of Wardour to surrender unto the Parliament and people of this realm, having trustworthy assurance that 'tis but a receptacle for cavaliers and malignants. I am under orders to search the place for men and arms, of which I see a brave array flaunted before me," he remarked, with an ironical bow to the assembled warriors, many of whom quaked in their shoes.

"Also, my papers bid me make diligent search and inquiry that, for the service of the Commonwealth, I may seize all money and plate which may be found within these walls."

"Sir, my thanks are due to you for your outspoken frankness," said my Lady Blanche in a clear, firm voice, as though it were some ordinary reception. "May I pray of you further to declare yourself, and make known to me the penalty awaiting us in the event of our refusing to hearken to your summons?"

There was something in the lady's undaunted mien which won the soldier's respect, but he had his message to deliver, and this was no time for idle show of courtesy.

"I pray you, Madam, to give heed to my words. We cannot suffer these pretty fortresses to harbour malcontents, and give any check to our victorious army. If you refuse to surrender, you do but bring down death and destruction upon yourselves, for you have no force to defend, from our cannon, a mere fortified dwelling-house such as this. If you consent to surrender at once, I will engage to give you and your women freedom to depart to a place of safety. Moreover, you shall take with you all wearing apparel and personal chattels; and the furnishing and goods in the castle shall be safe from plunder."

There was a breathless pause, then Lady Arundell controlled herself enough to ask quietly:

"And my faithful retainers, my men-at-arms, what do you in your clemency offer them?"

"I am empowered to give no assurance," was the cold, stern reply. "The men of every degree must yield themselves up unconditionally, and be tried according to their deserts."

A low thrill of horror passed through the hall, like a breath of icy wind. But the echo of those cruel words had not died away before the lady governor of Wardour Castle stood up in her place, with set features and flashing eyes.

"Sir Edward Hungerford, you are a worthy ambassador of the rebels who have sent you hither. I did but ask to try you, for I have never swerved from my purpose, not for one instant. I have a command from my lord to keep this castle against all odds, and I will obey his commands. Take my defiance, and do your worst. Our interview is at an end."

She pointed imperiously towards the door. The Puritan captain's parting words of warning and threatening protest were lost in a perfect tumult of applause from all sides of the hall, and he made his exit with somewhat less of dignity than his entrance.

As he was led out, well attended, across the great courtyard, he did not gain much satisfaction from his keen, rapid survey of the defences. He could see that the walls were very massive and strongly built, apparently well protected by cannon on the leads and crossbows in the loopholes. A casual glance through doors of meat-house and granary, purposely left open, as though full to overflowing, showed him that at least there was no lack of provision for a siege. But his

unmoved countenance gave no sign, and when the great door had swung back behind him, and the portcullis was lowered with a clash of iron, he mounted horse and rode back thoughtfully to his troop.

He had to own to himself, with a pang of disappointment, that he had been thwarted and frustrated in his mission. Knowing that Lord Arundell and the regiment he had raised at his own cost were at Oxford with the King, Sir Edward Hungerford had hoped to find the castle an easy prey. How, indeed, could a garrison composed of a few women and children and old servants expect to hold out? Conscious of their absolute weakness, they could but surrender at once. But the wife of Lord Thomas Arundell seemed to take a far other view of the matter.

Was it possible that she had some unknown means of defence? Or did she rely upon help from without? He knew not, but in any case he must withdraw his small body of men for the moment, and call to his aid Colonel Strode, who was in the neighbourhood, with part of the forces of Somersetshire. If the place was to be carried by assault, he would also need some artillery to batter the walls, and that he must secure without loss of time. So Captain Hungerford set off, with muttered curses on this Lady Blanche, who came of the fighting race of Somersets, the foolish, obstinate woman who gave him so much trouble.

But he inwardly resolved that he would be even with her yet, for surely it was impossible that a castle built more than two hundred years ago could be prepared to stand a formal siege and face all the modern improvements in warfare. True, there was a report that the Earl of Marlborough was somewhere in the neighbourhood with some horse, and any additional reinforcement of the garrison would delay the enterprise and add to its difficulty. It was this rumour which decided him not to let his men encamp in the park, lest they might be taken unawares and cut off. Besides, it would be a clever manœuvre to allow Lady Arundell to believe that he was so much impressed with the strength of the garrison and defences that he had decided to beat a retreat.

This would enable him to make so strong and sudden an attack, with additional forces and artillery, when the vigilance of the defenders had relaxed somewhat in their false security, that with good fortune he might hope to take the place by storm at once.

"Aye, and it shall fare hard with them, on my oath, for as they have scorned my courtesy now, I will give no quarter in the hour of victory," he muttered to himself in his wrath as he rejoined his men and gave the unwelcome order to retreat.

CHAPTER X

FROM THE DAY-BOOK OF MASTER JAMES RANDOLPH

Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight?

"AT THE CASTLE OF WARDOUR,
"*This 4th day of May* 1643.

"DEAR AND HONOURED MADAM,—

"I know not when this Epistle will safely reach your Hand, for at this Present I find myself lodged in the ancient Castle of Wardour, which hath been summoned to surrender by the Troops of the Parliament, and is like to be closely besieged. You, my dear Mother, and my honoured Father, will marvel greatly to learn that I have thus to all appearance cast in my Lot with the Party of the King, of whom my Lord Arundell is a staunch Adherent. Fully to set forth this and other Adventures, I send you various Pages of my Day-Book, in which, at your request, I have writ from Time to Time what befell me.

"Tuesday before Easter, 1643.—Have safely accomplished the long tedious Journey from Cambridge to London. The Roads bad and difficult for the Horses by reason of the heavy Rains. Lodged last Night at Waltham, and reached this pleasant Village of Chelsea in the Forenoon. Sent Gideon to make Enquiry for the Dwelling of Sir Hugh Damerel, the which being well known he was directed hither without delay. A very stately and a goodly Mansion, with trim Gardens sloping to the River, and by great good Luck found Sir Hugh and the Lady his Wife at Home. I presented my Letters and received a hearty Welcome, being persuaded to remove my Chattels from the 'Blue Boar" and accept the Hospitality of Cheyne House.

"My Host asked many Questions concerning his old Friend my Father, and would hear the whole Story of his Way of Life and

Well-being in Virginia, which it seemeth these English look upon as some wild and savage Region. Sir Hugh is a fine personable Man, with a sunburnt ruddy Face as of one who takes much Sport in the open Eye of Heaven, and he hath a right merry Laugh which warms the Heart only to hear it. But 'tis far other with Dame Thomasine Damerel. Madam his Wife is of a stern, sour Aspect, as might well-nigh have turned to Vinegar the choice Canary Wine which graced the Board at Dinner. And yet, to be just, I doubt not that she is a good religious Woman, for she spoke with much Praise of a certain Independent Preacher in the City, and won my Promise that I would attend her to hear him discourse on the Sabbath.

"As for Sir Hugh, when we sat in his Library after Dinner, we had much Talk on Matters of Politicks; and how that it grieved his Soul to take Part against the King, but that he deemed his Majesty was sadly led astray in the Matter of Hampden, and the Parliament, and in divers other Ways; also that the Queen's Flight abroad and sale of the Crown Jewels was deeply to be deplored. Then presently he broke off from these Affairs of State, and looked up at me with a Twinkle in his Eye, and began to speak of that Matter you wot of, dear Mother.

"'So, young Sir, if I gather right from your honoured Father's Letter, you be minded to come a-courting. And for old Friendship's Sake I could ask no better, but my Cynthia is still but a frolicsome Child. Say you not so, Thomasine?' and he looked to his good Lady as she sat apart at her Needlework.

"''Tis high Time that a Maiden of seventeen Years should outgrow her childish Waywardness, and learn that Life is not one long Summer Day. At her Age I was a Woman grown!' was the tart Reply.

"As I looked at the sharp thin Face and tightly pressed Lips, I had but little Doubt that Madam spoke the Truth; nay, I would have taken my Oath that she had never been young at all. A shrewd Glance of Humour from her Husband was more eloquent than Words. He turned to me and said:

"'I hold not with Compulsion in the Matter of Wedlock, and would have young Folks free to make a Choice within certain Bounds, and ever in their own Rank and Station. But there is Time and to spare, for I am in no Haste to lose my merry Puss!'

"'Surely, Sir Hugh, you forget the ruined Fortunes of your House, and that 'tis no easy Matter to find a suitable Match for a dowerless Maiden, and in a godly Household too,' she sharply rejoined. 'Moreover, in these troublous Times. . . .'

"'Ah, Madam, you have me there,' groaned the poor Man. 'These are indeed Days of Darkness and Strife, and our poor Country is in a parlous Way! If my Duty to my Country held me not back, I myself would gladly find a sheltered Home with all those I love, in far-off Virginia.'

"'Then, Sir, do you give me leave to hope that if I can win your Daughter you may be willing to spare her and be comforted that she shall enjoy a distant Home of more settled Peace?' I asked, though with some inward Misgivings, never having seen the Maiden.

"He must surely have read my Meaning, for he cried out:

"'By my Faith, Sir, but you are a bold Lad! Would you crave the Hand of an unseen Damsel, who, for all you know, may be a squinting, freckled Scarecrow? Ha! ha!' he laughed. 'Take my Counsel, Man. Say no more till you have made her Acquaintance. Come and visit us any Time your Journeys may lead you by Sutton Place nigh to Tisbury in Wilts. 'Tis there my Cynthia abides.'

"'I will not fail to profit by your Leave, Sir,' was all I found to say.

"'Meantime, my Lad, continue to make good Use of your Time at Cambridge. Doubtless you will there have met with the Parliament Member for that City, Master Cromwell?'

"Thereupon I told him, as you already know, that Captain Cromwell, as they call him now, had shown himself vastly friendly to me and had much talk with me about the Colony.

"But of this and sundry other Matters on which we held much Converse I will not weary you by dwelling, and will pass on to the strange Adventure which landed me two Days since within these Walls of Wardour Castle.

"I had left Cambridge, which in these Days of Strife and open Warfare was no longer a Peaceful Academy for Study.

Having an idle Time on my Hands, and being in Doubt where to turn my Steps, I bethought me of that promised Visit to Sir Hugh Damerel in his Country Abode, and set forth in that Direction.

"It was May Day, and the Magic of Spring was in the Air. I was ambling lazily along the elm-bordered Road nigh to the Village of Tisbury; my man Gideon following behind me, as grave and steady as old Time. There were many Wayfarers in the Lane, mostly Pilgrims bound for the May-day Revels on the Hill beyond. Then of a sudden, from the arched Entrance of a great Wood which skirted the Way, there flashed before me a Vision of Delight. A slim Girl with a radiance of golden Hair, mounted on a little Spanish Mare which she handled with perfect Ease and Freedom. She started and drew rein as she caught Sight of the motley Company and I had almost lost her from my View, when she woke the Echoes with a ringing Cry for Help.

"Two sturdy Ruffians had caught her Bridle, and were set on Robbery or Assault, but, as you may readily conceive, a Minute later I had settled their Account and rescued this Diana of the Wayside. But I soon found that she was no lonely Wanderer, for her Brother, with a Serving-man who had somehow loitered behind, now quickly joined her, and was loud in his Thanks. Indeed, I felt myself that I had played the part of a Knight-errant, in the Rescue of the Princess with the golden Hair.

"After this, what other could we do but jog on together, and in the Course of our friendly Talk I learnt that the Damsel was none other than the Daughter of Sir Hugh Damerel himself; my visionary Bride! Can you conceive such good Fortune?

"Here was I, in the Guise of a mere Stranger, brought by Chance into free Companionship with the young Girl; no Barrier of Mistrust or wilful Rebellion betwixt us!

"For to be candid with you, my honoured Mother, I soon discovered that Mistress Cynthia is not one of those meek Maidens who would give Heart and Hand at a Word from her Parents. She has a brave high Spirit of her own, as I grew to see and know her clearly in the varied Course of that Day's journeying. She may be led, but she will never be driven.

"Oh, that I could teach you to see her with my Eyes! A bright merry Child, loving and warm-hearted, yet full of keen and ready Wit; sparkling with Life, prompt to rule and help and guide. We all obeyed and followed her like a Queen. It seems that she had sallied forth in Search of a certain Jennifer, an old Servant, and when it was reported that she had gone on to Wardour Castle, the young Girl led us hither meekly in her Train.

"A Storm came on of a Sudden, and you should have seen her motherly Tenderness to a little Lad in our Party, her half-brother, the Child of that stern Dame Thomasine, her Stepdame, of whom I have written above.

"Mistress Cynthia was sure of her Welcome here, my Lady Arundell having been a dear Friend of her dead Mother. No Words can express the Hospitality which greeted us. To cheer their Guests they set aside their own sad Forebodings, and gave us a festal Night, with Coranto and Contredanse, and Music and Song. And here I must tell you that Mistress Cynthia hath the sweetest warbling Voice and harmonious Touch, for her Melody on the Lute Strings would have melted a Heart of Stone.

"You should have seen her in the stately Court Dress for which the Ladies had changed her wet riding Suit! She was a Picture the Eye could never forget. And now maybe, honoured Madam, that you will ask me how this 'Cynosure of neighbouring Eyes' is affected towards me? To all outward Seeming she looks upon me as her Friend and Comrade, but of any tenderer Feeling I can boast of no Sign. Nay, as yet I would ask for none.

"I only crave to serve her and shield her from all Harm. It is the Soul of a Child, serene and open as a Spring Morning. One day she will awake to find herself a Woman, and the Flood Gates of her Heart will open. . . . If in that supreme Moment the faithful Knight meets with his Reward, you will wish me Joy?

"Knowing all this, can you blame me if I see my Duty clear to join in the Defence of this Castle, all the more as 'tis against overwhelming Odds? How, indeed, can these Ladies with a Handful of Retainers, mostly aged Men, hope to make a Stand against armed Troops with Artillery?

"Ah me, but 'tis a mad World! Yet, if my Lady Arundell is inflexible to keep the Charge her Husband left her, still I can scarce believe that 'twill come to a Siege in Earnest. If the Spirit of Chivalry be not quite dead, surely the Army of the Parliament will spare this old Castle with its frail Garrison, and seek a worthier Quarry!

"Moreover, help may come to us at any Moment, for I know that a Messenger on Horseback hath been sent off with urgent Despatches to my Lord Arundell at Oxford. Have no Fear on my Account, for if it come to the Worst, I doubt not we shall all depart with full Honours of War, and the Ladies will come back unmolested to their stately Home, in more peaceful Days.

"I know not when this long Epistle may reach you, but rest assured that I have you and my honoured Father ever in my Thoughts, and will seek to so demean myself that you shall have no Cause to blush for me.

"So no more at this present, honoured Madam, from your affectionate and most dutiful Son,

"JAMES RANDOLPH."

DAY-BOOK CONTINUED.

"*This fourth day of May* 1643.

"Have this Day writ a Letter to my honoured Mother, tho' little knowing when it be like to reach her. To her I have spoken of Cynthia, but my Words are mere vain Shadows of the Truth. They cannot call up for her the radiant Image of my Love, for so I will call her in Secret on this silent Page, closed to every Eye but mine.

"Her light dancing Step hath this Moment passed thro' the Hall where I am writing this, half-hidden in the Oriel Window, and the very Air seemed laden with Sweetness and Music.

"Those Words I murmured in idle Fancy when first I met her, come back to me To-day with a Passion and a Meaning which thrill me thro' and thro':

> By Cynthia thus do I subsist
> On Earth, Heaven's only Pride.
> Let her be mine and let who list
> Take all the World beside."

CHAPTER XI

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more

FROM the deep oriel window of the Ladies' parlour, Cynthia looked out with wistful eyes on the terraced garden, in the quadrangle below. She felt it in her to envy the stately peacock, who looked around his narrow enclosed realm with serene vanity, as, pacing onward with majestic strut, he swelled his green iridescent neck and wheeled aloft his gorgeous fan to the envy and admiration of all meaner creatures.

It was barely two days since the girl had been within those castle walls, so why this unrest in her blood? Was it the wild craving of her nature for freedom and air, which already made her feel like a caged bird behind the bolted gates and barred windows?

A weird oppression seemed to weigh down her spirit. She looked round the richly furnished chamber where for the moment she was alone, for all the ladies of the household seemed to have their set duties, and knew not what it was to find time hang heavy on their hands. A costly illuminated "Book of Hours" was lying open on the inlaid table, and near it were several other books whose titles were familiar to her. "The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia," and "The Temple," by Master George Herbert, might have their attractions, but at that moment she had no more taste for them than for the delicate embroidery or homely spinning in which others were engaged.

Such was Cynthia's mood when suddenly she was recalled to the present reality, dark and terrible, by a thundering crash. For a moment she stood dazed and bewildered; then, at the second shock, the girl realised what had happened. The enemy's troops had returned in grim earnest, their guns had opened fire, and the threatened bombardment of the castle was a stern fact. She rushed from the room in eager haste, calling aloud, that some one might share her excitement, for at such a time solitude was intolerable.

All thought of dulness had vanished like a morning mist; every nerve in her body was tingling with elation, and her whole

being was braced and steeled by the first contact with danger.

It was a touchstone of which some natures could not stand the test. In the scene of confusion which followed, a few of the women were loud in their lamentations, and only shame kept them from following the example of one arrant coward, a young untrained serving-maid, who crept upstairs into her chamber, and burying her face under the coverlet, vowed that at least she would "die warm a-bed!"

But these were pitiful exceptions, and for the most part the besieged shared the brave spirit of their leader. They had indeed need of all their fortitude, as from the first ominous booming of the guns, which had been stealthily brought within musket range, the battery kept up a constant hail of shot, almost without ceasing, night and day.

It was a terrible time which followed. Had the fatal blow fallen at once, had the castle been carried by assault when the besieged were in the first flush of courage and enthusiasm, the strain would have been far less. But the ever-present danger, the deafening noise, the want of sleep, were enough to try the nerves of the stoutest-hearted.

The Lady Arundell herself was a very tower of strength, inflexible of will and dauntless of spirit, taking part with unwearied zeal in the work of defence, and with words of cheer for all, even the lowliest of her handmaids. Nerved by her dear lady's example, Cynthia shared the common lot, and took her place with the other women in the hardest service. Ever clambering up and down the steep staircases to wait on the men, supply them with ammunition, load their muskets, and carry them a snatch of food to keep life going. Fiery missiles struck the walls or passed through the windows, and then it was the women's part to carry up leathern buckets of water to extinguish them.

Still the iron sleet beat against that solid masonry, until at times the crash of falling stones almost sounded the knell of hope. Weary and footsore, dazed and worn out, for all her fresh, buoyant youth, Cynthia felt as if she had lived through an eternity of war and tumult, and scarcely took any further count of time, when, in fact, barely three days and nights had crawled away since the opening shot.

It was early Saturday morning, the sixth of May, a dark oppressive dawn with heavy drifting rain, when it might seem as though the very heavens fought against the hapless garrison. The roaring of the enemy's guns had somewhat slackened for the last hour, and men drew breath and almost dared to hope for a space of rest.

Enoch Moleyns, who was on guard on the leaded roof of the castle, by the turret in the angle of the north tower, became aware of a strange noise of digging nigh at hand, which he fancied he had heard before, in the brief intervals of the firing. He called to the man-at-arms nearest to him.

"Hi, Gideon! Do'ee hear that sound?"

"Aye, sure enough, Enoch. 'Tis plainer now, but, la' bless'ee, it have a-ben goin' on now an agen' all droo the night!"

"Tell'ee what, man! They rebels mun a-found the way to the vault, where us be wont for to haul beer an' wood an' sich like. An' I'd a-took my oath as we'd blocked it up an' made all safe! Now do'ee creep round an' bid the wenches get ready boilin' water an' melted lead for to cast down. An' thee'll find a hand-granadoe or two nigh agen the armoury door."

"Aye, aye, Enoch!" replied the sturdy fellow, whose fighting spirit was now thoroughly roused, and who in the common danger had almost forgotten, staunch Puritan as he was, that this was a Papist household which he was helping to defend.

So he went on his errand, chanting a bit of a psalm tune to beguile the tedious way down the long winding staircase. He met with but poor success, for the lad whose duty it was to keep up the kitchen fire that night had fallen asleep from weariness, and it needed a sharp cuff on the head to rouse him to his duty. The great fire was slow to kindle, for the wood had been left outside in the courtyard, and was damp with the heavy rain. Thus Gideon was so long delayed that the blacksmith came part way down the stone stairs himself, full of impatience, to fetch the hand-grenadoes. He met young Randolph going up to relieve duty, and cried out:

"I be afeared o' some mischief, sir. I doan't like the look o' this quiet. An' do'ee

see yonder?" he pointed through a narrow slit window. "They've a-drawd back their men like as they be on the look-out for some danger. I misdoubt me as they'll be for springin' a mine i' the vault!"

"Surely not," was the young man's breathless answer. "I will try to find out."

He rushed down three steps at a time, and had reached the courtyard, when he found himself suddenly thrown prostrate on the ground, with the shock of an awful explosion. Stunned with the fall and the deafening noise, his first conscious feeling was that he must be grievously wounded, maybe on the point ot death. In that supreme moment his one thought was of Cynthia.

"If I can but live a little longer . . . if I may but see her in safety! 'Tis hard to leave her thus in deadly peril. . . ." Then with a mighty effort, for her sake, he struggled to his feet.

Stones were falling all around him, it seemed as if the massive building must have been shaken to its very foundations, and he was half blinded by the thick dust of centuries But a strange sense of awe and wonder came over him as he felt his limbs, and could not find that he was injured in any way, beyond the slight bruises from his fall. As he slowly collected his senses enough to look round and discover what had happened, he saw a gaping hole in the wall, and the outside masonry of the stone staircase which he had just left was half destroyed.

"Where is poor Enoch?" he asked himself in sickening fear, and scarcely dared to seek for the answer.

A heap of masonry had fallen only a few yards from his feet. He took a few uncertain steps towards it; surely that was a broken musket, and yonder was a prostrate body . . . a heavy jack-boot stretched behind the fallen rubbish. Aghast with dread, James Randolph stooped down and moved away the smaller stones which half hid the lower limbs of the hapless man, for it was indeed Enoch Moleyns. Remembering his own marvellous escape, he could scarcely restrain himself from crying aloud the words which trembled on his lips:

"One shall be taken and the other left."

Very gently and tenderly he raised the old man's head and tried to discover if there were any sign of life, for as far as he could see the injuries were much less severe than he should have expected. The wall must have fallen outward before the blacksmith lost his footing, and he had thus been almost at the base of the staircase, or he would have been crushed beyond recognition.

At the sound of the explosion, Gideon had rushed out from the kitchen and quickly came to his help.

"Why, if 'tisn' poor Enoch! he as bid us all beware. But 'twas too late to do no good, for they mun a-set the match afore ever he knew! Ah, my dear master, us doan't need to mourn for'n; he wur one o' God's elect; a burnen an a shinen light i' this wicked world!" he remarked piously, with a meaning glance around.

"But, Gideon, if I am not mistaken he is still alive; and as good men are scarce, you'd best lend a hand to carry him out of danger, for there are more stones that look like falling in that wall yonder."

By this time an anxious crowd of men and women were making their way from all parts of the castle to the courtyard below, the great fear being that a breach might have been made for the enemy to enter. But, so far, the outer wall was untouched, as the mine had sprung almost under the courtyard itself.

"Oh, father, father!" wailed a woman's voice. "'Tis my dear father as they've a-killed."

Cynthia had been roused with the others, and was following close at hand; she heard the pitiful cry and came forward with outstretched arms.

"My poor Jennifer! Can nought be done? Maybe he still breathes. At the least he must be borne to a place of safety."

There was no lack ot ready helpers at hand, and Enoch Moleyns was gently raised and carried into a small ante-chamber opening out of the great hall. Straw was lying about, where men had snatched a brief uneasy slumber between their watches, and woollen coverlets, and on these they laid the wounded man. It was a ghastly sight, such as the girl had never seen before in her peaceful, sheltered life. The blood was flowing freely from a cut on the head, and it needed a strenuous effort on Cynthia's part to overcome her shrinking horror, and kneeling down try and staunch it with her ker-

chief. She was indeed learning in a hard school the grim realities of life and death.

For a moment one stood in the shadowed doorway and watched her, himself unseen, as some one held a torch aloft, for the light was dim. Was it possible that this was the light-hearted Cynthia, the fearless heroine of their merry May-day ride?

James Randolph looked in dismay at the golden hair all tangled and clouded, at the dark lines under the sad, pitying eyes, at the pale face whose upward curves were now all drooping and forlorn. Her clothes were torn and soiled, her slim hands stained and bruised with rough labour.

"Oh, my darling," he murmured to himself, unconsciously half aloud, "have you come to this? Can I do nothing for you?"

It chanced at the moment that Jennifer was passing by him, and her quick ear caught the whispered words.

"Nay, can thee do nought, master, do'ee say?" she cried. "Why, if so be I wur i' thy place, I'd find a way to seek for help afore us be all buried beneath the castle wall! There be no bolts, nor bars, nor rebel steel as'd keep I back!"

Before he could reply or further ask her meaning she was gone, for the poor woman was in eager haste to find the surgeon. Absorbed in his own thoughts, he had moved nearer to the anxious group, where the torch-light fell upon his face. It happened at that moment the sufferer awoke suddenly from his swoon and met the earnest watchful eye fixed on him. He gave a long, clear, searching look, then a slight sigh, and gasped out the words:

"Silas, mine own lad! Be thee a-comed to forgi'e thy poor old father? Ah, lad, I did'n ought to a-ben zo hard on'ee, but thee knows how 'twas . . . thee knows. . . ." He broke off with a painful struggle for breath, sank back, and once more lost consciousness.

His blind old wife by his side bent forward and felt for his nerveless hand, on which her tears fell fast as she sobbed:

"He be light-headed, be my pore Enoch; but 'tis gospel druth! He wur alles hot-tempered, wur our Silas, an' when father found 'en a-playing cards one Zunday, why they had words, an' zo parted. Ah, dear me! an' to think as 'tis market-day over to Shaftesbury," she rambled on; "an' Silas may be close on the road anigh the park this very minnit! for he be carrier, an' dwells close agen Anstey."

"Oh, if only we could let him know!" cried Cynthia impetuously. "There are no soldiers on that side, for all the assault hath been from the north. Surely some one might make shift to slip out under cover of the storm."

Was it chance or design which made her glance fall on the young Virginian? He gave a start as though a sudden blow had struck him full in the face. What was the meaning of this strange coincidence, this repeated call on his manhood to take a desperate step, which his calmer reason condemned as mad recklessness?

And yet was it not a choice of evils? In his inmost soul he knew that there could be but one end to this disastrous siege. Yet if only, by any means, outside help should come before it was too late, what a mighty influence it might have on the terms of surrender! Surrender? Yes, indeed, it must come to that, or in a few days more my Lady Arundell and her devoted garrison would be buried beneath the ruins of her stately castle.

The enemy had sprung one mine successfully, and the next might be under some central vital part of the dwelling, and then . . . alas, for those brave women whose gallant struggle would find its end in a tomb—where once stood their ancestral home!

CHAPTER XII

My life was of a piece,
Spent in your service—dying at your feet.

THE more he dwelt upon it, the more terrible became the ghostly vision of death and destruction which James Randolph saw drawing nigh for all he held dear. Scarcely marking whither his feet led him, like some wounded animal he instinctively turned to his lair.

As he crept up to the turret-chamber, where young Thomas Arundell had led him and Godfrey on their first arrival at Wardour, not a week ago, he could not realise the rapid succession of events which had happened since.

What a strange world it was! A merry party of young folks thrown together by chance, they had gone a-Maying as though

life were all one long spring day beneath a cloudless sky. Their wanderings had brought them, almost unawares, to seek shelter under this hospitable roof. Then, hey presto! of a sudden, like a transformation scene, there had come upon them the grim realities of life and death, the stress and horror of war!

But there was no time to dwell upon the past when the present clamoured for his service. Worn out and exhausted by want of sleep and scant food, and by the constant tension of mind and body since the siege, the young man had need of a desperate effort to collect his thoughts and decide upon his course of action. Only one thing was certain: he must devise some instant means of leaving the castle and setting forth upon his errand. True, it was a wild unreasonable desire of Cynthia; and yet her sweet generous unreasonableness was one of the charms of her impulsive character. He would not have her otherwise. All too soon she would be sedate and sensible like other women.

Since the explosion of the mine there had still continued that ominous silence, and again his fears revived that the enemy might have made some opening which he knew not of, and might even now attempt to carry the place by storm. Was it possible that the foundations had been weakened and that a breach had been formed? As far as he knew, however, the fall of masonry had been only in the courtyard, and had not affected the outward defences.

To make assurance doubly sure, he peered out through the narrow window, half-blocked up by the massive ivy which covered all that side of the castle. At that moment, as if in answer to his thought, there came through the drifting mist the old sound of firing to which he was so well accustomed. This was reassuring rather than otherwise, for it proved that the besiegers' plan for taking the stronghold by assault had miscarried so far. As he pushed aside the smooth green ivy leaves a sudden thought struck him.

On a narrow landing below there was another small window almost entirely concealed by the ivy, and if there were only room enough for him to squeeze through, the thick trunk might serve him to climb down, while the luxuriant foliage would shield him from sight. It was quite true, moreover, as Cynthia had said, that there had been no assault on this side of the castle, as to all appearance there was only solid masonry with no openings, and it was also somewhat protected by the walled garden.

He started up with fresh energy, for, though it was still early morning, there was no time to lose. The weather might change at any moment, and this close misty rain was all in his favour. His travelling pack was on the floor in a corner of the low room, and he hastily turned it over and rummaged about in search of strap or piece of cord. As he did so, a small leather case fell out, and Randolph opened it with a smile.

"I will be mine own post," said he. "Here is the letter I writ of late to my mother. And what is this?" He unfolded another sheet of stiff paper and read aloud:

"*To* MR. JAMES RANDOLPH, *late of the Colony of Virginia.*

"WORTHY SIR,—

"It hath come to my Knowledge that you desire my better Acquaintance, which giveth me Cause for Regret that weighty Matters of State do call me hence. Report speaketh of you as a worthy Son of your Father, whom I bear in Honour as one of those God-fearing Men who, for the Sake of Freedom in Religion, did seek a Home beyond the Seas. If I can, God willing, further your Ends at any Time, command me the Utmost of my Influence.

"Your Servant,

"OLIVER CROMWELL.

"*Cambridge, March* 10, 1643."

"'Tis the letter Mr. Cromwell first writ to me. Well, I may as lief take it, for 'tis well to be provided!" remarked the young man. "This paper might do me a shrewd turn in case of need."

A footstep on the stairs startled him, for it was the ponderous tramp of nailed boots. Looking up he saw his man Gideon blocking up the narrow doorway, and read doubt and suspicion in his face. It was a disastrous encounter, for he knew that he should have to face the strongest opposition, but there was no help for it, and he promptly made up his mind.

"Gideon, you have come at an ill moment,

for I have a secret which I would lightly reveal to no man. But if you will swear to me on your solemn oath that you will neither hinder nor betray me, you shall know all."

The man stood motionless, with folded arms; his keen sharp eyes fixed on his master as though he would read his very soul. He was more like a sentinel on guard than a serving-man before his lord; but he was well matched, for the younger man had set his face like a stone, and Gideon knew that look of old, and saw that he must yield.

"Master, I can tell that thee be up to some mad prank! Will nought turn thee?" he asked as a final appeal.

"Nothing in heaven or earth shall stay me!" was the firm reply. "And if I do it not with thy help, then 'twill be in thy despite."

"Needs must when the devil drives; I give in. But, my fair sir, do 'ee have pity on thy mother, if thou hast nought for thyself!"

"I have no time to waste in vain talk," said James Randolph impatiently; "and, moreover, you well know that we are in desperate case, and such do call for desperate remedies. We must make one more effort to procure help, for I have reason to know that there are troops in the neighbourhood favourable to this party. Maybe I could succeed where a mere country yokel like Giles Penney failed."

Without waiting for an answer, he gently pushed his man aside, and led the way to the lower landing and to the window he remembered. Here, to his great satisfaction, he found that there would be space for a slight figure to slip through, as in the course of time the iron bar across the centre of the narrow window had rusted away unnoticed, as the screen of ivy completely hid it.

In another moment the young man had disappeared through the opening and clambered nimbly down the ivy trunk. But before the horror-struck Gideon could find breath to remonstrate, Randolph was once more on a level with the window, and swung himself through it, with a low, suppressed laugh of boyish fun.

"See how easy it is, Gideon! But I warn you not to attempt to follow me; such sport is not suited for your burly form."

"Oh, my dear lad!" cried the old family servant in despair. "Must thee needs put thy precious life in peril for the sake o' these Papist folk?"

"Nay, not another word," interrupted his master. "By-the-bye, try if you can lay hands on the despatches which Giles brought back, and drop them at the foot of the wall within five minutes, for I can tarry no longer. And breathe no word of this to any save young Master Godfrey, if you come across him. I promised I would let him know if we made another sally, that day we went a-fishing. Now that was a mad prank, if you will, Gideon, yet here we be safe and sound. Trust me, there be more folks meet their death at home than abroad!"

"And how think you to return? The sentry will never let you pass," grumbled Gideon.

"Ah, there I need your help. I do but purpose to go so far as the Shaftesbury road to meet the country folk going into market. So do thee see to it that our sentry be on the watch for me, and take note I be clad in this sad-coloured suit. I will wave a white kerchief and give the watchword: 'Lady Blanche.'"

Silenced, but not convinced, poor Gideon Ascue obeyed. By good luck he found the wallet containing the papers still untouched and hanging on the same peg where it had been forgotten ever since the hapless Giles brought it back. The habit of obedience was strong upon him, but when he had done his master's bidding and dropped the packet to him, under the ivied wall, then swift remorse overtook him. With a smothered cry of rage and despair he threw himself against the fatal window and tried to force his way through.

"If I caan't hinder thee, leastways I can die wi' thee!" he moaned.

"Why, who talks of dying?" exclaimed a boyish voice. "'Tis a right easy matter for us all, these times; and there be no need to make undue haste to go to meet our foe."

The speaker was young Godfrey Damerel. He caught sight of the man's face, which told its own tale.

"Why, Gideon," he cried in startled dismay, "what means this? You are not wont to go a-bird-nesting! Where is your master?"

With a flash of insight he understood all. He had been close at hand, and had heard Cynthia's words.

"Tell me," he added imperiously, "is

he gone to do my sister's bidding? Did he give heed to those wild words of hers?"

This fresh light on the subject was a great blow to the unfortunate Gideon, and, in his wrath, he forgot all prudence.

"Then 'tis the young mistress as have drove he to his death?" he roared, as he looked up with flaming eyes. "An' I never gave it a thought, old fool that I wur! He be a-gone but this minute for to make a way thro' the besiegin' foe, an', by the heaven above, I never look to see his face agen!"

"Then where he leads I follow!" rang out the boy's eager voice. "Stand aside, man; I can guess the way he went."

Another moment and the lad was gone to join his friend, leaving the astonished Gideon to repent at his leisure. His first impulse had been a wild desire for revenge on the girl who had slain his loved master. "Now she would lose her brother too . . . his dear charge would not fall alone or unavenged. . . ."

But the cruel thought had scarce risen in his soul before his better nature scouted it. In the strong reaction which followed, his rugged fierceness melted away, and hot tears coursed down his deeply seamed, stern face, for two young lovers parted by deadly peril.

The passing madness had died away. He saw with clear insight that he could best serve his dear master by meek obedience, and that to wait at his post was a far harder duty than to sally forth and dare the worst.

But the faithful creature could not tear himself away from the spot, though after the first shadowy glimpse neither by sight nor sound was there any trace of the fugitives, who seemed to have vanished utterly into the thick hazy mass of trees beyond the precincts of the castle gardens. He strained his ears, but no challenge of sentry or musket-shot rang through the heavy atmosphere.

At length, with a sigh of relief at the silence which was so full of hope, he turned away to join the men-at-arms on the roof, who were in sore need of help, for now the firing was beginning again in earnest. The defenders found one comfort in this wet weather, which soaked them to the skin through their thick leathern jerkins. There were no balls of wild-fire to extinguish, and the enemy seemed to share the general depression, and perhaps the powder was damp, as the cannon-shot came for the most part wide of the mark, or fell short of the walls.

But misfortune had come in with the dawn, and all that ill-omened day one disaster succeeded another. The besieged had scarcely regained their serenity after the explosion of the mine, when there was a loud outcry from the kitchen quarters. Giles Penney, who made but a poor soldier, for his courage was apt to fail him at a pinch, had been sent to draw water, but there was none forthcoming, and the cook, in despair, hurried him off with the news to my Lady Arundell.

Utterly wearied out with her exertions, she had gone to snatch an hour's rest, but the matter was so urgent that her daughter-in-law, Madam Cecily, dared not do otherwise than rouse her at once.

Giles stood outside her door, fumbling with his cap in his hand.

"If 'ee please, mistress—my lady, I do mean—cook he sent I wi' a pitcher for to get some water, for, says he, 'There bean't not a drop i' my cistern', an' like as not the turn-spit mun a-drawd it away, out o' spite.' But, la' bless 'ee, 'twur the same i' the dairy an' the brew-house, never no water, and zo he telled I for to come an' let 'ee know to onst."

"Oh, Cecily," cried Lady Arundell in dismay, "this is bad news. You know how the castle is served with water brought two miles by a conduit of lead, which my lord caused to be laid down at a great cost. 'Tis from a deep spring that hath never failed in the driest summers. Maybe that the explosion hath laid the pipes open to view, and that the rebels have cut them. What a sore strait for us!"

"Do not fret overmuch, dear mother," said the younger lady gently. "There be good store of small beer and of foreign wines for drinking; and for other uses, see, the very heavens have come to our aid, and we must set great vessels out in the courtyard to catch the rain-water."

But Lady Blanche shook her head sadly. She knew too well what a terrible thing a scarcity of water might be in such a great household.

"Your face is not familiar to me. What is your name, and how came you to be helping in the kitchen?" she asked, turning suddenly with a touch of suspicion to the stable-lad,

for those were days when spies and traitors caused constant dread.

Poor Giles was still waiting, standing awkwardly first on one foot and then on the other, scratching his head, and not knowing how to dismiss himself from the awe-inspiring presence of these grand ladies.

"If 'ee please, my lady, I be Giles Penney, born over to Teffont, and serving-lad to Sir Hugh Damerel, an' I be a-comed hither along wi' Mistress Cynthia—an' savin' your presence, fighten not bein' much i' my way, they set I for to help the cook. . . ."

"Enough, enough, my good man. I see you are not the stuff soldiers are made of," said Lady Arundell with an amused smile, for she had a quick sense of humour.

She waved her hand and was turning away, when a terrible shock almost made the room tremble, and a shrill cry of distress seemed to pierce the very walls.

"The chidren! Oh, what has happened?" was the young mother's cry, as with trembling haste Madam Cecily raised the thick curtain and turned into the next chamber, followed by the others.

The sight which met her eyes was one to startle the stoutest heart. The marvellous carved chimney-piece of the Ladies' parlour, of priceless value, one of the choicest treasures of the castle, had been struck by a cannon-ball and rent in fragments which strewed the room, while the frightened children, who had been placed there for safety, clung to each other in the far corner, from whence arose sobs of pain.

"What is it, my sweet girl, my Cicely?" asked her mother, with an heroic effort at self-control, as she saw that blood was streaming down from the child's brow and dropping on her white dress.

For one brief instant there was no answer, but when she had clasped the little sufferer in her arms, and bound up the wound with her kerchief, she repeated her question. It was Henry, her younger boy, who answered.

"Oh, mother, it was Jennifer who brought us here after the mine was exploded. And we were only playing when there came a great flash, and a shot came whizzing in through the window and broke the chimney-piece, and a tiny bit of stone hit Cicely."

Still giddy and trembling from the sudden alarm, the poor woman could not yet realise what had really happened, and what a narrow hairbreadth escape it had been for her children. She looked round to count her treasures. There was Paul, the little guest, who stood and watched her with wondering eyes.

"Where is Thomas?" she asked in an agitated whisper, as she missed the boy.

"You know, mother, you told him he might go and help the soldiers for a while," replied Henry in a tone of envy. "He said he would look for Godfrey, and bide close to him; but I had to stay with the children," complained the would-be hero of seven years old.

Yes, she remembered, her elder son, the little lad of nine, had prayed so earnestly that he might help to load the guns and carry up powder and shot, just that one day, that she had yielded, inwardly proud of the young heir's bold spirit.

"We were having such a quiet game," said poor little Cicely, now soothed and comforted. "We made believe we were grown men and women, and did take our choice what we would be. Henry was all for being a soldier, but little Paul here, he would be a merchant to buy and sell. Think of that!".

"And you, my sweet, what was your choice?"

"Ah, I said that I would be a holy sister, like dear Aunt Mary, to pray for you all,"* whispered the child, as she clasped her arms round her mother's neck and pressed a fond lingering kiss on her cheek.

Lady Arundell had stood by in silence until that moment. With clear insight she first grasped the whole situation. On the one hand, her priceless heirloom shattered beyond retrieve; but, on the other, the dear children saved almost by a miracle.

"On your knees, my daughter," she said in a low calm voice. "Let us thank Heaven together for the precious lives of our darlings, spared to us when death and destruction are all around."

CHAPTER XIII

As gentle and as jocund as to rest,
Go I to death.

THE fateful Saturday was drawing to a close and only a few rays of the pallid watery sun-

* Cicely Arundell became a nun.

set pierced the narrow window of the low outer chamber, where they had borne the wounded man. All day long the battering of the enemy's cannon had thundered on, striking now and again with heavy thuds against the solid masonry, like waves against a rock-bound coast. But now for a brief space the firing had ceased and the silence of aching hearts reigned in the darkening room.

Beyond all hope, Enoch Moleyns had lingered on through those long weary hours, but death was written on his face, and the loving watchers knew that the end was near at hand. The massive head with its strongly marked features lay back on the raised pillow, the thick iron-grey hair tossed away from the broad forehead, lined and fissured with the toil and care of more than sixty years. Under the heavy brow, his deep-set eyes were closed for the moment, but his big sinewy fingers crept restlessly over the coarse blue coverlet.

The very atmosphere was weighed down with an awful stillness, only broken from time to time by the long choking gasp of the strong man, who fought to the last for his breath.

By the side of his pallet-couch sat his wife Caroline, gaunt and stiff in her silent misery. Her poor blind eyes were heavy with unshed tears, and her toil-worn hands rested idly on her knees, as she slowly rocked herself to and fro in the strenuous determined struggle for self-control.

By the half-open door, shadow-like against the evening light, rose the tall slim figure of a girl. It was Cynthia Damerel, who stood sentinel against all comers. Nothing henceforth should disturb that sacred spot, no futile contention or sound of strife.

At the first note of alarm the priest had come, in well-meant zeal and charity, prepared to receive a wandering soul into the sanctuary of his true Church, even in the last mortal agony. But some pitiful human instinct, deeper even than loyalty to his cloth, had bid him pause and hold his hand, and yield to that pathetic heart-stricken cry of the devoted wife.

"Oh, measter, do 'ee let my poor Enoch die in peace, i' the faith o' his forebears!"

The black-robed figure had passed silently away, but still there was a yearning look in the woman's eyes as she turned towards her fellow-watcher.

"Mistress Cynthia," she began in a hoarse whisper, "if so be as my pore Enoch caan't put up a prayer for hissell, there be a God-fearen man as comed hither along wi' you, Gideon by name, as mid do it for he. He doan't sing no lewd ballads wi' the rest, but there be ever a psalm-tune on his lips, one o' the songs o' Zion. Do 'ee think now as he'd pray wi' us?"

It was impossible to resist that touching appeal, and the girl had sent word to Gideon at once by a passing man-at-arms. For her own part she did not look upon the singing of ballads as a capital sin, and a dim pity filled her soul at the thought of poor blind Caroline, whose life had never been gladdened by pipe or tabor, and who looked upon all pleasure as wickedness. But a new tolerance, born of love, made her strangely humble. That day had burnt its fiery lesson deep down into her heart.

A whole lifetime of experience, of sympathy, of suffering, seemed to have been pressed down into those few hours. She had been taken out of her own small identity, raised above her narrow range of thought and feeling; and her spirit had been attuned to hear some faint echoes of that still sad music, which floats abroad over this work-a-day world of men and women, but is only heard when self is silent.

She and Jennifer, no longer as mistress and maid, but friends in sorrow, had taken it by turns for one to watch by the dying man, while the other went on working with unceasing zeal at that weary grind of musket-loading and carrying for the men-at-arms. These poor fellows were becoming so worn out and exhausted that they could scarcely touch food, and would often fall asleep at their posts.

Since the early morning, in the stir and excitement of the explosion, she had never met her brother Godfrey or James Randolph, and had missed their genial presence, with a vague sense of loss and disappointment. But no rumour of their adventure had reached her, and she only supposed that they must have been called away on sentry duty at some of the outposts. Nothing foreshadowed the terrible awakening which was in store for her.

There was a movement on the sick-bed,

and the blind woman bent forward to listen in a tense strain of expectation, groping to feel for and clasp the passive hand, which quivered at her touch. Cynthia, too, drew near to be ready in case she could do anything, but she saw that there was no look of recognition in the face of the wounded man, and his low dreamy words were not spoken for mortal ears.

"I never had no gift o' tongues like father, but I've a-tried to mind the smithy and do my work honest . . . ."

"An' zo thee have, my dear," murmured old Caroline with a pang of self-reproach.

She remembered how in the bygone years, before her own affliction, she had ofttimes been impatient with the slow silent man, whom she seemed only now really to understand, when it was too late. She hung upon his breath, but there was a long anxious pause before he spoke again. The faint glimmer of returning consciousness in those piercing blue eyes was hidden from her.

"Silas, lad, I've a word to say to 'ee. . . . Where be our Silas, mother?"

"Thee mun ha' patience, Enoch," said his wife very tenderly. "Like as not some good soul have a-sent word to he, an' maybe the poor chap'll find a way for to come to 'ee, or leastways let thee know as he doan't bear no malice."

Cynthia started, and almost let fall the goblet of cordial which she held ready in her hand. She had quite forgotten her rash words spoken in haste that morning, until the blind woman, with her clear memory for sounds, shut out as she was from all other avenues of sense, had thus brought them up before her, like an avenging angel.

Caroline only knew that her dear husband had craved for his son, and that the young imperious voice had bidden some one go seek for Silas, and meet him on his way to market that morning. In her quiet world of darkness it seemed to her that the word thus spoken must be law, and that somehow her poor Enoch's dying wish would be granted.

The memory of that scene rose up before the young girl with sudden accusing force. Was it possible that those rash impatient words had been taken in deadly earnest? that they might have goaded James Randolph to risk his life? for he was always ready to go where adventure beckoned him. A cold shiver crept over her and she seemed rooted to the spot, unable to move or cry out. Was this the meaning of her strange loneliness and isolation all the long hours of that day?

There was a sound of tramping feet on the stone courtyard outside. Nearer and nearer they came, the door was thrown open and her trembling wistful gaze met the cold stern eyes of Gideon Ascue. It was a look of unspeakable reproach, almost of hate, and it told her all that she did not dare to ask. Passing the young girl by, as one of no account, the grim Puritan drew near the dying man.

"Enoch, my friend, I couldna' say thee nay, an' I be come to put up a prayer for thy parting soul. The Lord make all thy bed in thy sickness. Aye, for the Lord do know His own elect, an' will prove thy calling an' election sure. He hath sealed thee from an evil world, an' will take thee to reign wi' Him in glory. . . ."

And so, as the words of solemn triumph and exultation rang out through the silent chamber, they seemed for a moment, in their familiar rhythm, to call back the life which was ebbing away with the ebbing day.

Jennifer had crept in silently and knelt by her father's side with bowed head, to hide the sobs which shook her like an aspen leaf. The hand-lamp which she had brought threw a stream of yellow light on the low couch, and shed a softened radiance on the pallid solemn features of the strong, rugged face. Huge fantastic shadows slowly moved across the walls and raftered ceiling, like the silent flapping of dark mighty wings.

Cynthia found herself standing close to the man whom she had reason to believe held her fate in his grasp. In the breathless pause which followed his pious invocation she found strength to ask in a timid whisper:

"Where is your master?"

"Mistress, he be gone to do thy bidding," were the cold metallic words which seemed the death-knell of her hopes.

Again she spoke, and this time the question seemed to escape unconsciously from her lips.

"And my brother Godfrey?"

There was a pause before the answer came, and the hard voice sounded as from a distance, through a haze of pity.

"'He hath sealed thee from an evil world, an' will take thee to re'gn wi' Him in glory'"

"The brave lad would needs go wi' his friend; the Lord have them in His keeping."

The girl seemed to hear like one in a dream. This confirmation of her worst fears was no news to her; she felt as though she had known from all eternity what must be the end. And yet some strange calm had taken possession of her, she made no outcry or passionate lamentation, she did not even shed a tear. It was as though an icy hand had been laid upon her heart, and held her a mute image of stone.

The fountain of her emotion was frozen within her, and she had become a mere unmoved looker-on at the drama now acting before her, with its final scene—the everyday tragedy of life and death. A merciful numbness had taken possession of all her faculties, and she stood there a silent watcher—almost like some disembodied spirit come back to haunt the scene of a former life.

Yet memory lived on, for to her dying day each minute detail of the picture before her was stamped upon her mind.

The strong man, suddenly stricken down by violence in full vigour of body and soul, was lying a wreck before her. Enoch had tossed the coverlet aside and his broad massive chest was bare; those powerful arms, with the muscles standing out in ridges, would never more wield the blacksmith's hammer; they fell still and nerveless by his side. He might have been merely resting from labour, but that something blenched in his blue eyes, and now and again a quiver passed over the gaunt features, while the blood-stained bandages told the rest of the story.

The upturned face of the blind wife by his side was a study in itself, as the lamp-

light fell full upon the careworn countenance, glorified in saint-like semblance by agonised patience and triumphant faith. Even in her own dull despair, Cynthia knew that look would haunt her, for the comfort of her soul, and be to her a priceless possession in the days to come.

Since his long prayer, Gideon had been restless and ill at ease; his work was done and the man was impatient to be gone.

"I can't bide no longer, my good maid," he whispered to Jennifer. "'Tis a matter o' life an' death as I be set to watch for. But now doant 'ee grieve overmuch for thy father. The Lord knoweth His own, an' so He giveth His beloved sleep."

There was no audible answer, only a grateful look from the stricken daughter, for those words of comfort.

Treading on tiptoe to deaden the sound of his heavy jack-boots, the staunch old Puritan moved heavily away, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left. His mission of watching could brook no more delay.

As he passed her without a word Cynthia stood trembling like the flickering flame of a tall altar-candle. She seemed to have no power to move, and, almost against her will, she stayed on, a reluctant intruder on the last great mystery.

It may be that the familiar sound of holy words, spoken in the tone and manner he knew so well, had touched some sensitive chord, for the dying man seemed once more to recover consciousness. His lips moved, and the broken words were breathed forth like a sigh or a benediction.

"Silas, dear lad, I knew thee'd come. Thee wur alles thy mother's darlen, an' now her'll bide along o' thee . . . to hoam . . . dear lad. . . ."

It was but like the final wavering of a candle, the fatal forerunner of the end—of the pain and panting of death. Even as his voice died away into silence his far-away gaze betrayed that he had no more concern with the things of this present world.

A grey film of mist began to creep slowly over the wistful eyes and veil the last look of inscrutable wonder. The pages of his life's ledger were closed, and his face was now set towards the Celestial City. In mystic isolation the wanderer was going forth on his far journey. His wife knelt by him, with clasped hands, in tearless, silent awe. To her blind eyes it was given to see visions, and she could look beyond the anguish and severance of death. She knew that he was travelling away from her to the

"Sank exhausted on the ground"

eternal home on which their hopes were built; he might not linger nor look back, but he would be waiting in the gateway to welcome her.

There was a long-drawn breath, a faint sigh, just a tremble, as the head sank back on the pillow . . . and the watchers were alone with their dead.

CHAPTER XIV

The star of Love, all stars above,
Now reigns o'er earth and sky;
And high and low the influence know—
But where is County Guy?

THERE was no sleep for Cynthia that night. With tender, loving care her nurse Jennifer had led her away from the chamber of death, and had then gone back to her own sad duties.

The girl sat by her window, looking out on the deep blue-black sky, from whence the rain clouds had drifted away, and where the stars blazed like silver. The moon was rising above the trees, a pale thin crescent, while now and again, beyond the hum of life in the castle, rose the liquid rippling notes of the nightingale.

Then of a sudden the rebel guns began roaring again and, in her present mood, the vibrating deafening noise was more akin with the tumult and unrest in her soul. She craved for movement, action, battle; anything were better than thus to stand aside and wait for evil tidings.

"If I were but a man," she cried, "and not a mere useless chit of a girl! If I could but go forth in search of my dear ones or, failing all, if I could die to avenge them!"

She started to her feet.

"I am on the rack, and can no more endure this uncertain state! If I could but seek out Gideon I would make him tell me all. What dark meaning had he when he left us in such haste, and said that on him might hang life or death?"

One moment she paused to listen by the bedside, where little Paul's even breathing told her that he slept in peace, then with swift, noiseless steps she threaded her way through the dark labyrinth of the old castle. A new fount of hope had been springing up in her soul, when she was once away from the grim presence of the old Puritan serving-man.

Surely two gallant stalwart lads, keen of ear and swift of limb—James Randolph, too, a wary hunter experienced in Indian warfare—might almost achieve the impossible, and make their way unscathed through the enemy's camp.

With the elastic hopefulness of youth, Cynthia rebelled against the dread certainty which had been forced on her unwilling spirit. As though in answer to that newborn thought, the girl caught sight of a great shadow cast athwart her moonlit way. Some instinct told her the man she sought was before her. His broad-built sturdy form quite blocked up the deep, narrow, ivy-clad window where he stood on guard, raising from time to time a horn lantern as a signal.

At the sound of her rustling dress, Gideon turned in a strange excited manner, and with a deep muttered "Hush!" caught her hand as in a vice, and drew her in front of the window.

"Do 'ee see nought agen the big yew-tree yonder, mistress?" he whispered. "Thy young eyes mid be sharper than mine."

She strained her eyes but, for an instant, she could see nothing in the faint glimmering light. Then as she gazed on, with almost painful intensity, she felt sure that she could discern a moving shadow creeping stealthily under the overhanging boughs, against the far wall of the terraced garden. She held her breath. Yes, a slim boyish figure was passing close by the rhododendron bushes and drawing closer to the wall each moment, a white handkerchief held aloft in his hand.

"'Tis Godfrey," she murmured through her half-closed lips, still keeping her eyes fixed with passionate intensity on the boundary wall. Then she suddenly turned and met the drawn, agonised face of the old servant, who had stooped to drop out the rope, which was already secured to the iron bar.

The same thought filled both their hearts: "*One* had come back from that perilous mission, but—he was alone!"

There was a creaking sound, a rustling in the ivy leaves, a pallid white face was on a level with the window, and a second later young Damerel had clambered through, with the help of a strong arm, and sank exhausted on the ground.

"Godfrey! Thank heaven you are safe.

But where is he? What has happened?" was the girl's instinctive cry.

With more practical common sense, Gideon took out a flask of cordial and plied the boy well with it, before it gave him strength to answer.

"Oh, Sissy dear, I do fear the worst! Look not so reproachful at me. I be not to blame; at all hazard a man can but keep his word! We had to part for greater safety, so he said, but methinks 'twas to save my life. . . . He made me promise, as I loved him, to make straight home and tarry not; and to give this ring to thee as a token. You were his last thought, Sissy!"

He stretched out his hand and even in the dim light Cynthia recognised the signet-ring which James Randolph always wore on his little finger, a ruby heart which glowed like a flame. She took it with a choking breath, in silence, for she dared not frame the question which trembled on her lips. Nay, was not this the answer?

A great sob burst from poor Gideon, who had understood only too well, and the girl waited in mute terror for a fierce outbreak of wrath. But the next words she heard were spoken with a gruff tenderness of which she had not believed him capable.

"Why, my poor lad, what have a-comed to 'ee?" he asked, for he was the first to discover that her brother had fainted.

As he bent down over the prostrate form the dim lantern-light revealed a stream of blood oozing down from the left arm. Cynthia took the lantern which he held out to her, while he examined the wound and deftly bound it up with the white kerchief which was still tightly grasped as a signal.

"'Tis but a graze from a musket-shot," he said to reassure her. "But the boy will need careful tending, lest fever be the price o' this day's work."

"Can you bear him to my room?" she asked with a sudden impulse. She thought of the dead man below, and it seemed to her that her secluded chamber was the only safe place.

"Ay, mistress, that can I," was the staunch reply; and without another word he raised the lad in his strong arms and carried him to the blue guest chamber, which had seen such strange vicissitudes.

"I may not tarry; 'tis my hour to mount sentry," he muttered, as he turned away hastily, to avoid any show of gratitude.

Cynthia could not speak her thanks, but moved by some courteous instinct she held out her hand, and it was grasped in mute pardon and farewell by a strong, true hand-clasp. Thus was the bond of sympathy sealed, in that bitter hour, betwixt the two sad mourners.

Godfrey opened his eyes and for a moment looked round the vast dimly lighted room with dazed bewilderment.

"Where am I?" he cried with a start.

"You are safe back, dear; you have bravely carried out your adventure," was his sister's calm reply. She knew how dangerous all excitement would be for him, yet it was all she could do to tone down her voice and still the wild impetuous longing, which welled up within her to know the worst.

"O Sissy, I am half dead with hunger and thirst. I have never touched a morsel all day," was his next remark, which lifted a load of fear from her mind, and brought her to everyday life.

There is no such cordial in time of anxiety and sorrow as practical work to do. By this time every staircase and passage, every nook and corner of the old castle was so familiar to the girl that she was able to thread her way about, and soon brought up food and wine. She set it deftly before him, and watched him eat with silent satisfaction. His boyish health and vigour were asserting themselves nobly, and she felt that soon her patience would be rewarded; she would know all.

"Sissy," he began, "how is that poor old Enoch? I have a message for him. We had the good luck to find that son of his."

"He is dead, Godfrey," was the low answer. "It was such a beautiful end, so happy and peaceful. He spoke of his son Silas at the last, and seemed to know everything, with the strange wisdom of the dying! You have no cause to grieve that you came too late."

"Silas Moleyns seems a fine fellow. He will make a home for his mother and sister. He was sorely troubled with our news, and would have made a dash to get back to Wardour with us. But when Randolph found there was a wife and little children, he would not hear of it."

"Ah yes, he was in the right," she sighed. "But tell me——"

"I know what you would hear, my poor girl," said her brother, looking full in her face with sad, pitying eyes. "I will begin at the beginning, for you must hear it all some time; and 'tis best got over at once," he added in his boyish wisdom.

"I never knew what was in the wind until I came by surprise on old Gideon, and he let out that Randolph had just gone off on his bold venture through the enemy's lines. Look you, Sissy, he took your words to heart, and he was set on seeking help for this poor doomed castle. But, in truth, 'twas a mad venture!"

No one would have recognised the impetuous Cynthia Damerel, for she simply bowed her head in silence. She dared not say one word in her own defence lest she should break the thread of the story she so longed, yet feared, to hear.

Godfrey went on with brotherly unconsciousness:

"You would not have had me stay behind when Randolph led the way? So I clambered through the window and down the stout ivy stem to the ground. For a moment I was in doubt which way to turn, until I called to mind how we played a game at the bowls out yonder one morning, and he had pointed how there might be a way of escape by climbing the wall under the old yew-tree and creeping through the thicket of rhododendrons. So I made straightway for that point, so well as I could distinguish it through the misty rain, and, guided by a faint rustling in front, before long I came up with him.

"Oh, but he was right mad with me, and if a hail of rough words could have driven me back he would have had his will. But I stuck fast. If there was danger for him I would share it, for we two had come to Wardour together, and together we would leave it. He even called me a mere child, a schoolboy; but I told him that a Sherborne boy should win his spurs that day! We soon had to put our mettle to the proof. I had my own doubt that 'twas not likely the enemy would leave the approach from the main road to Shaftesbury all unprotected.

"And so it fell out. We had not gone more than a hundred yards, creeping stealthily through the long wet grass and under the dripping boughs, startling the rabbits who scuttled away to their holes, before we saw ahead of us a man's figure looming out big and massive through the damp mist.

"It was an awful moment, for on this encounter hung all the success of our mission. Had there been time to consult, I doubt not that Randolph would have prevailed with some wiser counsel, for, as we drew a step nearer, sure enough it was a sentry. His back was turned to us, but at any moment he might see us, and fire his musket, so rousing the foe if he missed. Randolph had a brace of pistols in his holster, but dared not risk the noise of a shot.

"The thought passed through my mind that the soldier was doubtless weary with the night watch, drenched and dispirited; so I clenched my teeth and gave a sudden spring like a wild cat on his shoulders, and clapped my hands before his mouth. In an instant Randolph had tripped him up with one of his wrestling tricks, and the musket fell to the ground with a clash, but by merciful good fortune there was no report. The fellow was taken by surprise, and maybe unnerved by superstitious terrors, for, once prostrate on the ground, 'twas no hard matter to gag his mouth and strap up his arms and legs, so leaving him unharmed, but helpless as a log. Then we drew him somewhat under cover of the green shoots of brake fern, that he might be less readily found by his comrades.

"'Now, Godfrey,' whispered Randolph, 'our sole chance of safety lies in swift flight, for it must be nigh on the hour when the guard is relieved, and then all will be discovered, and there will be a fine hue and cry.'

"So we set off at a brisk pace, and never drew breath, I warrant you, till we passed out beyond the wooded precincts of Wardour park. There you come on the high road, nigh agen the milestone: 'Sarum 14 miles, Shaston 6 miles;' and a weary long way those six miles were, as we had good cause to know. The country folk were already on their way to market, with carts laden with poultry and eggs and green food. I was for accosting the first we met, but Randolph is ever discreet, and he said truly, 'twas a venture which side these rustic might take.

"So we sat us down by the wayside till

by-and-bye, there comes along a carrier's waggon newly painted, with a well-conditioned horse, and the driver a man of a ruddy good-tempered countenance.

"'Now I'll warrant that is no snivelling psalm-singing Puritan!' said I.

"Then Randolph cut me short. 'I will hear no words against the Puritans, lad. Your father and mine have cast in their lot with them to fight injustice and oppression.'

"He had borne his testimony, but he took my hint all the same. For he stayed the van, and asked if one Silas Moleyns, of Anstey, had passed that way.

"'Zilas Mullens, do 'ee zay, measter?' asked the man in such broad dialect that we could scarcely understand him. 'Why, la' bless 'ee, doant 'ee know as he've a-comed in vor a bit o' good luck? His wife's vather be dead, an' have a-lef he a tidy bisness as saddler over to Shaftesbury! There beant no call vor he to traipse along thik there road, i' these bad toimes, wi' sodgers eating up all afore them!' He had lowered his voice and looked round suspiciously, when I made a bold shot.

"'Then you are for the King?'

"'Ay, God bless he, an gie he back his own agen.'

"There was such a tone of honesty in his voice that we made no more ado, and asked him to let us journey to Shaftesbury with him, for Randolph was set on seeing Silas, and also finding safe hands with whom to leave the despatches."

There was a pause in the boy's narrative, which of late had been dragging sleepily. Cynthia was growing more and more impatient, for this was indeed telling the whole story, with a vengeance! when it was the end she was so craving to hear.

Had her brother done this on purpose to put off the evil moment? His head had fallen back on the pillow, and he seemed to be quite overcome with sleep. But the poor girl felt that she could endure this awful strain of suspense no longer: at any cost she must rouse him, and hear the final news of Randolph's fate.

She bent down and kissed him on the brow.

"Godfrey, dear boy, just a few words more. Tell me quick why you are here alone. What befell him?" she asked in broken, hurried speech.

He opened his eyes drowsily. "Oh yes; where was I? We found Silas, and he broke down utterly to hear of his father's terrible mishap. He would have come back with us at all risks, but Randolph would not hear of it, and bid him mind his duty to his poor frightened wife and little children. With many tears he prayed his father's forgiveness."

"And so you turned homewards?" interrupted Cynthia.

"We made our way back, tramping along the sodden byways and lanes, delaying our passage through the park until dark, for greater security. For we could not forget that hapless sentinel, and indeed we soon discovered that all the approaches to the castle were now but too well guarded. But the thick undergrowth sheltered us for some way, as we crept noiselessly along. Then of a sudden a musket was fired in our direction and rustled through the bushes. We stood still, and another shot whizzed by so close to my arm that it actually carried away a strip of cloth from my sleeve."

"Then you never knew that you were wounded, you poor boy!" murmured his sister beneath her breath.

"Randolph whispered: 'They must have seen one of us to aim so well, but they may not know there be two. We must part, dear lad, and take different ways. Go you along the wall, crouching under the rhododendrons, and, by the love you bear me, swear that nothing shall hinder you. Give this ring to you sister; she will understand.'

"Then he turned from me and walked boldly across the open, in the full moonlight. There was a flash, a report, and he fell. . . ."

Cynthia heard no more. The terrible reality, told thus in full detail, seemed to leave no room for hope, no loophole of escape from the conviction that he had deliberately given his life to save Godfrey. Until that moment she had not truly known her own heart. All her courage, all her self-control failed her in that crisis of her life, and with a wild despairing cry she fell forward in her brother's arms.

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CHAPTER XV

Gie ower your house, lady, he said,
Gie ower your house to me.

In the days that followed, Cynthia seemed to move about like one in a dream. She spared herself nothing, and took her full share in all the terrible hardship and toil of the besieged, as the battering became more fast and furious. But night and day, ever before her mind, was the image of the gallant young hero who had gone forth, at her bidding, on his perilous exploit, and who had given his life to save her brother.

A subtle change had come over her girlish beauty; the ennobling touch of sorrow had given an inward spiritual light to her sweet face, which unconsciously influenced all who saw her. The children clung to her skirts, and little Paul nestled in her arms in a way he had never done before, whenever for a brief space she was free to devote herself to them.

Godfrey looked at her with a new wonder, almost touched with reverence. Was this calm, steadfast woman, to whom others turned for help and comfort, could this be his sprightly madcap sister? He shared her silent grief for his friend's loss, and it had made him, too, feel strangely old, as though he had left his careless boyhood far behind; but this was quite another matter.

In those last bitter days, when all felt that the siege must be drawing to a close, there grew up a strong bond of sympathy, a curious freemasonry between the young girl and the stately Lady Arundell. The older woman, with her wide experience of life, her own stern training in suffering and anxiety, understood Cynthia as no one else could do. Deeply she grieved over the loss of the young Virginian, who had done her such good service; and for the opening love-story which had been so terribly and abruptly closed. The young girl was one after her own heart, who could thus bravely take up the burden of life and work after so crushing a blow.

"Yet, indeed, my sweet child," she would say at times, "we have no certain knowledge of the worst. Our friend may be wounded, and a prisoner in the enemy's camp. 'Tis but a poor wisdom that would go halfway to meet sorrow, which ever rides fast enough to overtake us!"

But Cynthia would shake her head sadly. She had heard the talk of the men-at-arms, and knew that a spy—as they could not do otherwise than take him for—would meet with no mercy, and be shot at once.

Her wound was deeper than she thought. She could scarcely believe that she had only met James Randolph for the first time on May-day. But since then what a week it had been—unparalleled in history, it seemed to her. Surely never had a century of events and feelings been crowded into so brief a space! How had this marvellous change come upon her? What was the root of her sorrow? True, she had heard of love before, she had read of love, and sung of love in ballads—and gaily mocked at it! But *this* had a deeper meaning than anything she had ever dreamt of. Yes, for his sake she would do her duty nobly, and keep a brave heart to the end.

With the keen insight of a loving heart, she saw how Lady Arundell's strength was wearing out, though her indomitable spirit kept her ever to the fore. So the girl set herself to be her constant companion and spare her in every way. The unceasing toil and movement which left her no time for thought, was in truth the best medicine for her grief. Hers was one of those rare sweet natures to be tempered and not crushed by sorrow.

So the fateful days wore on. Nor was alarm and ever-present anxiety wanting. The besieging army was, day by day, drawing up closer to the walls, hemming them in more and more. The want of water was a serious matter when the rain ceased and the weather turned suddenly hot and fine; for, alas! there was now no doubt that the leaden pipes from the spring had been cut.

Cynthia was so much trusted, that she was in attendance on the eventful night when Lady Arundell, beginning to find the position hopeless, decided to hide away all the remainder of the silver plate, money, and jewels, having given up the hope of bearing them away in safety. There was a small secret chamber built in the wall of the "Ladies' Parlour," and completely hidden behind the tapestry, and here many objects of value had already been placed for greater security. The poor lady outwardly maintained her usual self-control, but she was deeply affected,

for she felt that this was one of the final acts of the drama, setting the seal, in a way, to her own defeat. She had sent Cynthia to fetch her elder grandson, young Thomas Arundell, the future heir, that in more prosperous future times he might bear in mind where the treasure was hidden.

"My little lad," she said in broken tones, "if in the days to come you be tempted to think hardly of us, in the sad event of our yielding the castle, never forget my solemn word, that had the forfeit of mine own life only been in question, I would gladly have died to preserve the trust reposed in me. But I know that the spirits of my soldiers begin to flag, and that others complain of their grievous hardships, and amongst themselves are importunate for me to surrender, though they durst not tell me so face to face. This I do therefore in preparation, lest on a sudden I be driven to yield by fresh disaster."

Then charging him to keep the secret shut up in his own heart, she kissed the child and dismissed him.

The scene still haunted Cynthia in restless dreams, and she was sleeping on, somewhat late in the morning, from sheer exhaustion, when she was suddenly awakened by an awful crash. The doors of her chamber were burst open, the window blown down, and she was half suffocated by a cloud of dust. There was confusion on all sides, a fury of shouts from without, women rushing and screaming, for the building was shaken to its very foundation. The girl's first thought was that the castle was taken by assault, but Jennifer came to help her in haste, and then she learnt what had really happened.

It was plain to all by this time that a second mine had been sprung, powder having been secretly conveyed into a vaulted passage under the lower chambers. More than once there had been ominous sounds of digging outside, under the walls, and when attention was called to this, the men-at-arms did their best to stop it by throwing down boiling water and hot lead, for all the hand-grenadoes were expended.

The end had come, for after this resistance was impossible. The heroic woman in command had no longer any choice. For some days past she could not fail to see that the shadow of alarm and mistrust was creeping over the faces of even her stoutest adherents. Unless she were so set in her purpose as to be willing that, not herself alone, but all her devoted little garrison, should be buried under the ruins of her stately home, she had no alternative but to sue for terms.

With a last forlorn hope she climbed wearily up the half-ruined spiral staircase to the highest turret window, from whence she could gain a distant view of the northern entrance to the park. Lady Blanche strained her eyes with wistful longing, but in vain. There was no far-off glimpse of the promised help; her heart sank in bitter disappointment, and she was half blinded with tears.

In that moment of her deepest agony she was roused by a slight movement behind, in the doorway. Cynthia had followed her full of tender longing to comfort in this hopeless trouble.

"Dear madam," she whispered, "you are worn out with sleepless toil and anxiety. A few hours' rest, and you will be yourself again."

But her friend heard her not; she was listening to a sudden outcry below. "What sound is that? Hark! Do you not hear? What fresh disaster hath befallen us? Come, child, let us prepare to meet the worst," cried Lady Arundell, as she led the way down.

Gideon Ascue was the first to meet them in the gallery; he had rushed up the main staircase to warn the household.

"They've a-set petards agen the garden door, an' when they do burst, us be all undone! No mortal power can save us!" he cried. "There beant not a minute to lose."

"Then bid them run a white flag up the tower at once," said the lady calmly, "and let the trumpeter sound a blast. We will seek a parley with the enemy, and make the best terms we can."

The news spread like wild-fire, and even the bravest men of the garrison knew that the capitulation had been delayed to the very last moment. The trumpet notes, for all their warlike ring, had a sad pathetic sound which thrilled the hearts of all within the ill-fated walls, like the pageantry of a soldier's funeral.

The appeal was promptly answered, for so spirited and desperate had been the defence that the besiegers over-estimated the strength of the garrison. Also, they had no means of knowing that if their last attempt on the

garden door had been successful they would have had a free passage into the very midst, and could not have failed to carry the castle by storm.

It was still early in the afternoon when the portcullis was raised to admit the stern procession of Parliament soldiers. Very different was this last parley from the stately reception ceremony of only one short week before. Then the Lady Arundell, full of hope and courage, surrounded by sturdy retainers and confident of speedy succour, had received the summons to surrender with proud contempt and dismissed the ambassador with scant courtesy.

Now the tables were completely turned. Sir Edward Hungerford was master of the situation. He came in state with his escort of Puritan soldiers, whose musket butts rang defiantly on the stone pavement. He was the conqueror now, and the proud woman, who had made such a desperate struggle for her home and her race, was a suppliant at his feet.

There was but little show of triumphant bravery or courtly magnificence in the neglected hall, which bore traces of the rough uses to which it had been put in that time of peril. Only a few grimy serving-folk and men-at-arms, with some hollow-eyed, exhausted women, had hastily gathered, unbidden, round their beloved mistress, in this dark hour of her humiliation. By her side sat her son's wife, Madam Cecily Arundell, who had much ado to hide her tears. She had brought her two boys with her, in the vain hope that the sight of these helpless children might touch the heart of the grim Puritan commander.

But she little dreamt, poor woman, what a cruel disappointment and sorrow she was preparing for herself!

As for Lady Arundell herself, it was indeed the bitterest hour of her whole life, but she was outwardly calm and self-possessed. She sat erect on her raised daïs, and her lips were firmly set; there was a heightened colour on her cheeks, and a flashing light in her dark eyes which boldly faced her foe. Only the faint quivering of the delicate lace on her grey hair would have betrayed to a close observer her inward trepidation.

Sir Edward Hungerford stepped out across the hall with a triumphant smile.

"Well, madam, so I am given to understand that you repent you of your contumacy, and that you are willing to surrender this Castle of Wardour to the officers of the Parliament, which alone has the right to govern this realm?" he asked in a tone of arrogance.

"Sir, methinks that a gallant officer and a gentleman would show more courtesy of speech to a lady who has done her best to keep the command entrusted to her, and hath but asked for this parley to save bloodshed."

"I am not here to bandy words with you, madam," replied the officer curtly. "You have given too much trouble and labour already by your cursed obstinacy, which hath cost us the lives of some three-score of our brave soldiers. For that, it is meet that you should suffer chastisement. Are you prepared to yield up this castle without conditions, ere this hour-glass, which I hold in my hand, hath run out its sands?"

"No; a thousand times no!" cried Lady Arundell, rising to her feet with a gesture of defiance.

"I will not imperil the honour of my gallant company by such terms! It needs be we will die fighting, but not disgraced."

There was a brief silence in that great hall, a breathless stillness of intense expectation. Then Sir Edward Hungerford, who had really been trying the effect of a little bluster, asked in a more courteous tone:

"You mistake me, madam; ours is no savage warfare. We have no wish to trundle down your brave men like ninepins, with our iron sleet of bullets! Will it please you, my Lady Arundell, to propose your own terms for our consideration?"

The ready answer came at once.

"This is my demand, sir. First, that the ladies and all others in this castle shall have quarter. That six of our own serving-men shall attend us whither we may go. That all the women servants shall be free to return to their own homes, and also such of the men folk as have not been enrolled in any troop. That we may all be at liberty to carry away the whole of our wearing apparel; and, lastly, that all furniture and goods in the house be safe from plunder," she said with a clear, unfaltering voice.

"Much of this we may be prepared, in our clemency, to grant you, madam. But thus far I must be plain with you. All members of the Arundell family will be conveyed

whither the Parliament forces shall send them, to be released ere long at our pleasure. But, if I mistake not, those pretty boys should be grandsons of Sir Thomas Arundell, who is at this present in open warfare and rebellion against us. They shall continue in our safe keeping as hostages for your good faith. Further speech is useless. I give you until this hour-glass hath run out for your final consent."

With this he made a deep bow to the unhappy lady, and, turning on his heel, left the presence chamber with his followers, amid the rattle of clanking steel and tramping of feet.

Silence and consternation reigned in the hall. What if all this parley should come to nothing, and the castle be stormed after all? It was easy to discern how pitiless would be the temper of the victors!

Cecily had clasped the boys in her arms and was sobbing aloud. In that critical moment a youthful voice sounded clear and inspiring.

"Why, Thomas, lad, 'tis fine to be you and Harry! They take you for children no longer, but for grown men! And they would hold you prisoners of state in your father's stead, while we be all the common herd, of no account!"

The brave little lad turned from his mother and nodded at the speaker.

"Ay, Godfrey, 'tis a true word, and I was minded to take it for an honour. Grieve not, mother dear; you shall have cause to be proud of us both."

Cheers of applause greeted the young heir, and Lady Arundell, who by this time had regained all her courage, stood up and waved her hand for silence.

"My good friends, all that I have asked on your behalf will be granted. You will be suffered to bear away your personal effects, and, after a brief space, you will all be free to return to your homes and wait for better days. For ourselves, as we have been foremost in position, so we must bear the penalty of our greatness. We will not await the running out of the hour-glass sands, but I will send instant word to the besiegers that we accept their conditions, and will surrender the castle as early as they may desire on the morrow."

It must be confessed that these brave words brought a sense of relief to all. There were even some few smothered cries of applause, but they were promptly checked by the better feeling of the others, who, as they looked on their stricken lady, felt that never before had they so honoured her gallant spirit, and that for her sake they would have died, if need be!

There was some further diplomacy, and passing to and fro of messengers with petitions on the one side and demands on the other, but at length the terms of capitulation were settled, and the hour of surrender was fixed for the early morning, on the stroke of eight of the clock.

CHAPTER XVI

> But let us now, like soldiers on the watch,
> Put the soul's armour on, alike prepared
> For all a soldier's warfare brings.

SILENCE, mournful and oppressive, reigned over the doomed castle. The bombardment was at an end, that incessant deafening noise from the two cannons which, to tell the truth, had done far less damage than might have been expected against the massive stone masonry. The springing of the mines in the vaults below had been by far the deadliest assault.

But this sudden stillness, with all its ominous meaning, was far more terrible to the gallant besieged, broken down as they were, and exhausted by ceaseless toil and watchfulness, for this was the stillness of despair. Yet, come success or failure, joy or sorrow, peace or war, life with all its varied needs must still go on. The marvel is, not that men are crushed by overwhelming disaster, but that in the face of ruin they can still take interest in the merest trifles of everyday existence.

For so it was during that last night at Wardour. Each man and woman, from the highest to the lowest, had something to save from the general wreck. It might be only a pack of old clothing, some unspent wages, or a domestic pet—whether it was young Thomas Arundell's splendid deerhound or the scullion's mongrel cat.

The time was short indeed for all that had to be done before daybreak. Every means of conveyance must be got in readiness, from my lady's travelling coach with its four horses, to the rough carts and waggons which had

been brought in from the farms around, at the first alarm of the siege. The horses must be fed and harnessed before the stroke of eight.

There was no leisure to enjoy the sad luxury of giving way to grief; even the women checked their tears, save some few of the younger serving-maids, who were rather proud of their tender hearts, and found a solace in loud sobs, as they went about their work for the last time.

The ladies of the house had need of all their fortitude to face the ordeal before them. During the few hours of daylight which remained, Cynthia had been Lady Arundell's right hand; running hither and thither for her on all sides, bearing her orders to one, summoning another, and helping her to respond to the numberless appeals and questions which unceasingly beset her. For the girl had come as a mere passing guest to this hospitable roof, and had no personal belongings to trouble about; she was free to devote all her time and thought to others.

She found my lady's tire-woman in despair, for her mistress would give no care or heed to her own splendid dresses of rich silk and costly brocade. The only answer she returned was:

"I shall never need them more, Deborah. A sober gown of black will serve me for the evil days that are left."

Cynthia had come across the faithful servant, in the state bedchamber, which was strewn with choice linen and delicate lace and gowns of rare fabric and design.

"What shall I do wi' all this, my dear young mistress?" she sighed, her eyes dim with tears of regret, and quite at her wits' end.

"Why, pack it all up, Deborah!" replied the girl, with the eager hopefulness of youth. "'Tis but a passing cloud of trouble. There must be brighter days in store, when your dear lady will come back to her own, and need all her beautiful garments once more."

"Oh, do 'ee think as they'll suffer me to go wi' her, my dear?" asked the old servant, with anxious longing. "'Tis nigh on forty year as I've served my dear mistress. It do seem but t'other day when she come here, as sweet a bride as ever drew breath, great lady though she be! An' to think o' such as she driven out of a hoam like this, to be prisoner wi' a lot o' rough soldiers!"

Cynthia looked round at the magnificence and the delicate refinement around her; the silken hangings, the Turkey-wrought carpet of many colours, the inlaid cabinets, the works of art and priceless pictures—and she too shivered at the thought of the terrible change awaiting her dearly loved friend.

But the poor lady herself had deeper cause for anxiety and sorrow than the mere loss of material things, however precious.

As the evening shadows closed around, she lighted the silver sconces in her stately parlour, and shut herself in alone to the sad task before her. She had already collected all her husband's private papers and letters, and these she must carefully look through, to burn and destroy all that might not fall into the hands of the enemy, and which she dared not even risk in the secret chamber. There she had already hidden away and walled up the more important title-deeds and ancient documents relating to the great estates of the family, but this which remained for her to do was far more trying and difficult.

A wood fire was burning on the hearth, and into this she had already thrown many papers of state interest, and others of private import, when she came upon a little packet tied up with silver thread. On it was written in faded ink:

"From my Sweetest Blanche, in the Year 1606."

As she held it in her hand for a moment, a crushed rose fell out from between the yellowing leaves, and the faint old-world scent brought back the happy past with a sudden glow which seemed almost to blind her. But she dared not dwell upon those foregone memories of blessed gladness and changeless love. With a lingering kiss upon the tender words, and eyes dim with unshed tears, she dropped the letters, written the year before her marriage, and treasured by her husband during all the long years of their wedded life, on the flaming hearth, and watched them crumble to ashes.

All was melting away from her save the haunting ghost of past happiness.

Cynthia had been early dismissed to her own room, but sleep was impossible. Hours later, as she lingered in the dimly lighted gallery, a sound of distant music caught her ear. Surely it must come from the direction of the chapel! Softly rising and swelling, the melody echoed through the stillness, and she

could not resist the attraction of that solemn melody. The craving was strong upon her for something above and beyond this visible world in which her soul might find a sure stay, now that all she had to cling to seemed to be melting away from her grasp.

She stole quietly along the eastern passage till she reached the chapel, guided by the music, which seemed to beckon her on. With noiseless touch she pushed open the door and found herself in the dim light, amid a group of kneeling figures. At the seraphine sat Cecily Arundell, the children's mother, pouring out all the passionate emotion of her spirit in a Mass of Palestrina, while soft harmonious voices joined in response. The deep, low touching lament, the exquisite chords of thrilling hope, the avalanche of sound which swelled into a glorious strain of inspiring triumphant faith, swept through the chapel and seemed to sway the worshippers to a pitch of lofty self-devotion.

Even Cynthia, of an alien faith, felt herself to be one of a spiritual company, marching in a bond of heroism onwards to the great final victory—through the shadowed portals of captivity and death.

She lingered on, spell-bound, for she could not tear herself away until the soul-enthralling melody had died into silence. She had thought to escape unseen, but it was not to be. Lady Arundell had caught sight of the young girl in the doorway, and made her a sign to remain.

"My dear child, it is not my will to dismiss you, but I am no longer mistress here," she said, with a wan smile. "As you know, on the morrow all this will be in the hand of the spoiler, and we shall be homeless exiles."

Cynthia bent forward and kissed her hand, in mute sympathy. Then, with an irrepressible burst of feeling, she cried:

"Could I but have shared your fate, dear madam."

"Nay, my child, your first duty is to your own people," was the quick reply. "Your old nurse hath taken means to secure your safety and that of the child. You will go with her, and . . . sometimes think of me, in happier days. Now farewell, my Cynthia, for we may not meet again. You will find a little gift——"

But the weeping girl heard no more. There had come an imperative call for the Lady Arundell which she could not choose but obey. The hurrying footsteps and whispering voices had passed away, leaving her alone in the darkness, before she remembered the errand on which she had set forth. She must find Godfrey and have a few last words with him, and maybe turn him from his purpose, before it was too late.

As she reached the head of the great staircase, a flood of light streamed up from the hall. There was life and movement everywhere, for there were few indeed who could pass the whole night in sleep before such a dawn as awaited them. After some delay, fortunately she came across Gideon, who went in search of her brother, and brought him to meet her on the landing.

The boy held a quill and a sheet of paper in his hand.

"You see, Sissy," he explained, in rather a shamefaced way, "I thought my father would like a few lines from my pen to say farewell; and he might let the Master at Sherborne know that 'tis no fault of mine if I play truant next half."

"Godfrey, dear," she explained in earnest tones, "you know that little Paul and I are to go in disguise with some of the serving-folk as far as Jennifer's home. Think of poor father's anxiety about you, and if you have the chance, I pray you seek to escape with us. I have cause to believe that the men-at-arms will be taken prisoners to Bath, where sickness rages, but they of the household will be sent to their homes. Come with us, dear boy."

The lad shook his head. "Randolph never would have hidden in the rags of a menial, to run from danger or prison."

The name acted as a talisman. Cynthia clasped her hands tightly, and caught her breath with a long-drawn sigh, but she made no further effort at persuasion.

"Godfrey," she exclaimed suddenly, "can you fetch me the inkhorn? I would pen a few words to madam on your paper, for who knows what may be our fate on the morrow? They may take us all in my Lady Arundell's train, and should any mishap befall the child, the grievous burden of remorse will be more than I can bear. At the least I would have her and father to know that if we came hither in a wild freak of adventure, and brought the little lad with us, 'twas from no

lack of love to him. I would gladly shield his life with my own."

"Ah, Sissy, dear, who could misdoubt you?" cried her brother. "You should have heard what poor Randolph said of you that day. I make no doubt he would have given all his broad heritage in Virginia to have a sister like you."

CHAPTER XVII

Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness!
This is the state of man: to-day he puts forth
The tender leaves of hope; to-morrow blossoms,
And bears his blushing honours thick upon him;
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost.

DAYBREAK at length. A few stars fading away in a daffodil sky, and then the flush of dawn came softly up from the horizon, and was mirrored back in opal tints from the great pools in the park below the castle walls.

Then the light spread, clear and roseate in the sky, and golden day bathed in sunflood the sleeping earth. The thin mists of the valley melted away, and sunlight played on the grim old castle, which stood out stern and threatening as in the happier days ere its glory had departed, and streamed into Cynthia's chamber as though it shone for her alone.

She had yielded at length to Jennifer's persuasion that she should rest a while, and though she had protested that she could not even close her eyes, she had scarcely rested her head on the pillow before she sank into the deep sleep of exhaustion.

"Bless the dear lamb! What can a-comed to her? I do hope as she beant a-took wi' sickness," the nurse had murmured to herself, quite overcome by this marvellous meekness of her wayward charge.

Soon a hum of life rose on the air from the courtyard below. There was a tramping of heavy jack-boots, a rattling of firearms and rumbling of wheels and neighing of horses. Only a few hours more, and so much to be done! Then the last scene in that sad drama would be played, and the curtain fall on the bitter ending. But the present is for action; in the long future there will be time enough for regret.

Presently a bugle note rang out, loud and clear, from the enemy's camp, and that morning it seemed to have a peculiar, long-drawn cadence of triumph. At once all was stir and commotion amongst the soldiers. Their great field-day had come when they would reap the rich harvest of success. Already no small amount of plunder had fallen into their hands.

All the red deer and fallow deer, of which there had been a fine stock, had been killed, and they knew there would be cart-loads of carp when they dragged the fish ponds. The miles of lead piping which had conveyed water to the castle would cut up for sale, as lead was always in great demand in those days. All the trees, fine bushy heads and solid trunks, more especially the oaks and elms, would sell well.

But, above all, rumour said that the treasures within the castle were of great value, and these the soldiers were looking forward to as their rightful spoil, and were in high triumph and expectation.

All too soon for the vanquished, the fatal hour of surrender arrived. On the stroke of eight, when the great clock in the tower boomed out with its deep bell, the portcullis was raised and the massive gates thrown open. The Parliament soldiers were drawn up on each side of the entrance, and lined the way with serried lines of pikes and muskets.

Still the sunshine lived on. The morning was divinely beautiful with the fresh radiance which only an English spring can boast of. No leaden sad-coloured sky took its tone in sympathy with the chill misery of the sad, downcast company, who were waiting to pass out in mournful procession.

First came the heavy travelling chariot, drawn by four horses, and with its full complement of attendants, in which rode my Lady Arundell herself, her son's wife, and her three grandchildren. This was met, as it reached the gateway, by the chief officers of the victorious party on horseback. With her own hands the Lady of Wardour yielded up the keys of the castle to Sir Edward Hungerford, who took them in courteous silence, bending low on his saddle. By his side rode Colonel Strode and Mr. Edmund Ludlow, with whom the government of the fortress was to be left, followed by other officers of his troop. As the chariot moved on, the soldiers appointed as an escort closed in around it.

After the first few carriages had driven forth slowly through the gate, there was an outburst of triumphal martial music. Trumpets flared and drums resounded, and in the excitement of the moment, amid shouts of victory, there was a rush of armed soldiers to take possession.

Some little way behind, and still in the courtyard, in a rough waggon, with Jennifer and her blind mother, was Cynthia Damerel, closely muffled up in a peasant's hood and cloak, with the child Paul in her arms. She had just made a pleasant discovery, for in the two horses spattered with mud, half hidden under an undue quantity of old cart harness, their manes cut off and their tails tied up with straw, she had recognised her own mare Donna and Godfrey's nag. Giles, their own stable-lad, whom she had always looked upon as somewhat of a fool, must have spent the night to good account in disguising them to be thus driven by him in a waggon.

Startled by the sudden noise and tumult, she looked up to see that the rebel troopers had blocked the way before them, and were making a raid on a pile of baggage belonging to the ladies of the castle. One man had thrust forward his pike and pierced open an enamelled chest, and was now dragging out a brocaded dress covered with lace, which she recognised as belonging to Lady Arundell.

In her indignation she forgot all prudence, and standing up in the waggon, she cried out:

"Shame on you! 'Tis against your captain's promise to rob the ladies!"

Fortunately her voice was drowned in the general tumult, but her hood had fallen back, and her eagerness attracted the notice of some soldiers close by.

"By Gad, but 'tis a comely wench!" laughed one. And another made a ribald jest, which passed harmless over the girl's head, for she understood not a word of it.

But Jennifer was wild with terror, and looking round in her despair she chanced to catch sight of a familiar face.

It was none other than that of Master Ahijah Balsum, the Independent minister, who was riding close behind Mr. Edmund Ludlow. A ray of hope dawned in her soul, and she shouted out in pitiful entreaty. By happy fortune the good man was quite close to her and recognised her at once.

"You here, Jennifer Moleyns! Yea, and surely those be Sir Hugh's children. . . ."

With a significant "Hush!" she laid her finger on her lips.

He had seen Cynthia and Paul, and though puzzled beyond measure to understand how they came there, it was plain that they were in evil case, and he had the sense to lose no time in vain surmises. He touched his friend on the shoulder.

"Mr. Ludlow, will you do me a vast favour? In yonder waggon is a poor good Christian woman of our persuasion. Can you devise means to have her sent with her friends in safety, through the precincts of the park? I see the old mother is blind!"

His appeal was successful, for the new commander was anxious to avoid any disturbance or scenes of violence. A few troopers on horseback were told off to see Jennifer's waggon safe on to the high road, beyond the park gates at least. But it was no easy matter to clear the way through the crowd at the entrance gates; and Donna, who was always high-spirited, began to kick and rear.

"Hillo, you lout there, caan't 'ee lend a hand?" shouted Giles, who had all his wits about him.

The lad addressed ran to the mare's head, and quieted her at once.

"Thee mid zo well jump on her back and keep the beast steady!" roared Giles again in a rough, surly tone.

And then, peeping out between the folds of her cloak, Cynthia saw that this new impromptu postillion was her brother Godfrey, whom she had given up. Indeed, in those ragged grimy clothes, his only suit which he had worn incessantly during the last week, he had no need of a disguise, but might very well have been taken for a scullion-lad.

Yet, after the sharp lesson which she had so lately received, his sister held her peace, and neither moved nor spoke, although her heart throbbed with tremulous joy.

Presently a familiar voice sounded behind her.

"Mistress Cynthia, I marvel greatly to find you in this sad case! Hath aught befallen your honoured parents since I took my leave of you?"

It was the good minister, who had ridden back himself with the troopers to make sure of their safety.

"I have no news of them, dear Master Balsum," replied the girl, full of gratitude for this act of kindness. "This adventure was of mine own seeking, alas! We did but set forth from home on May-day in madam's absence, and unlooked-for events have guided us hither. But, believe me, 'tis a lesson will last me a lifetime."

"You had best find a safe shelter as soon as maybe," he whispered. "The roads be full of peril in these troublous times, and our escort can but protect you as far as the park gates. Ludlow is an old friend of mine, and hath prayed me to bide with him at Wardour as chaplain to his troops. Hush! Make me no reply, already we do rouse suspicion."

Cynthia took the hint, and mutely thanked him with a smile. But as they moved slowly through the park it was as much as she could do to restrain her indignation at the scene of ruin and desolation.

All the outbuildings and lodges had been burnt down, the pales of the deer park torn up, the deer and cattle were all gone, the green slopes trampled, the trees hacked at and felled wherever they came in the line of firing. How poor Lady Arundell's heart must have ached at the dismal sight! It was almost a relief when they had left all behind and reached the high road, for then at least they could speak openly, and were free from the restraint of the protecting troopers, who rode back briskly, followed by Master Balsum.

"Well, Giles, you villain! I'll be even with you yet! How durst you treat me so?" cried Godfrey merrily, as he leapt off Donna's back and climbed up into the waggon.

But Giles only replied with a loud guffaw of laughter, and all the party joined in full appreciation of the jest. The stable-boy had come out in a new character, and would have good cause to remember that one flash of humour all the rest of his days.

Little Paul was disposed to be the most doleful of the party. It had been a fine time for him during all that eventful week, with his dear Sissy to take care of him, and Cicely and the Arundell boys as companions. He had no desire to go back to the strict discipline of his home and the tender mercies of his careless nurse maiden. But as the waggon presently dragged its way through a long rutty cart-track, jolting them all from side to side, Godfrey lifted him out, while Cynthia lightly followed, and they strayed away together into the fair meadow, sprinkled with cowslips, which skirted the way.

It was so delicious to be free once more, out under the open eye of heaven, with the sweet fresh breeze of spring blowing in their faces, and filling every sense with ecstasy! The child filled his hands with the wild hyacinths which lined the hedge like a blue sky breaking through the earth. The hawthorn was bursting into bloom amid the feathery spring foliage, birch-trees quivered in the breeze, and farther on were clouds of white alder, standing out from a background of shadowy pines.

Cynthia found it almost impossible to believe that only ten days had passed away since she last rode in lightsome merriment along that very way. It seemed as if a whole lifetime of adventure and sad experience severed this journey from the former one. Yet it must be so, for the heart of May was still throbbing in the pleasant land; even the blossoms had not had time to fade, and the delicate green leaves were still as tenderly new as when she had gaily gone a-Maying.

The change was in herself. From time to time on her fair young face there would come a dim shadow, deepening into pain, as sorrowful memory rose up between her and the sunny weather. Of the two who had grown to be more than friends, one was wandering in youthful freedom over a sunlit world, but where was the other?

Jennifer's anxious voice summoned them back to the waggon, for they had reached the point where a long stretch of open road lay before them, and every chance passer-by was a cause of alarm to her. She had gone through so much that her nerves were shaken, and she was troubled and uneasy if her charges were out of her sight. At length the mossy roof of the woodside cottages rose in view, and the lumbering waggon drew up on the grassy verge of common land.

It was a sad home-coming for poor old Caroline Moleyns, but it may be that her blindness saved her much. To the inward eye of memory there would be no change for evermore. She would miss those long familiar sounds; she would not hear her Enoch's voice nor the cheerful stroke of his hammer on the forge, but she would ever see his dear

face unchanged, as in the days before she lost her sight. Leaning on her daughter's arm, she felt her way across the threshold, for Jennifer had been eager to play her part as hostess, and had soon found the rusty key and unlocked the cottage door.

Meantime Godfrey and Giles had set to work to bring in all the packs and bundles of household goods and the little store of provisions from Wardour. There was a small embroidered tapestry box, which young Damerel looked at with some curiosity, for it did not appear like the baggage of a peasant, and he knew that his sister had taken nothing with her.

"Oh, Mistress Cynthia," cried Jennifer eagerly, "'tis the tirewoman of my Lady Arundell as brought it for 'ee, wi' her mistress's love and blessing."

The young girl opened it in wistful tenderness, touched beyond measure at the thought of this kindly remembrance at such a time. Neatly folded within, she found the beautiful court dress which Cecily Arundell had lent her on that first evening at Wardour Castle, of which the radiant memory had been almost blotted out by the troublous time which followed. As she looked at the soft sheen of the flowered tabby suit of blue, with its delicate texture and colouring, and the rich bodice front of silver brocade, she wondered at the sweet thoughtfulness which had given her this memento of a night so gay and brilliant, alive with dance and song, and which would ever be an epoch in her life. But this was not all. In a small packet below was a pearl necklace, on which hung a miniature of Lady Arundell herself set in pearls.

The girl's eyes filled with tears as she looked at it and thought of the contrast for her dear lady, now an exile and in captivity.

But she had work to do and cared not to dwell on those sad memories.

On the way from Wardour they had talked over the matter, and settled that Godfrey should ride over that very day to Sutton Place, attended by Giles, and find out what had befallen there. In the troubled state of the neighbourhood there was cause for the deepest anxiety, and of course not a word of news had reached them since the morning they left their home. They did not even know if their stepmother had returned, or what story of their flight might have reached Sir Hugh, far away in distant Chelsea.

All were agreed that Cynthia must wait meantime at Tisbury, in Jennifer's cottage, with little Paul, until a safe escort should be sent to fetch them. But it was hard to be left behind, and it was with a sad heart that the girl stood at the garden gate and watched her brother ride away.

CHAPTER XVIII

Ah me! the flower and blossom of your house
The wind hath blown away to other towers.

THE great lumbering coach which plied weekly between London and Salisbury had just rumbled into the yard of the "George Inn," with a great blowing of horns and shouting of postillions. There was much excitement in the county town, for it had been delayed on the way, and no one knew for certain if it had been attacked by highwaymen or not.

There were not many travellers, for the whole land was so unsettled just then, and the roads so unsafe, that no man set forth on a journey without urgent need. By the style and quantity of their baggage, they were guests of distinction who had arrived that afternoon, and mine host, Josiah Bartlett by name, stood in the doorway beaming out a welcome from his broad shiny countenance.

"Why, 'tis his honour Sir Hugh Damerel come back to us, and with his lady too! This be good fortune, indeed!" he exclaimed, his genial voice subdued to tones of respect as he came forward, cap in hand, and opened the coach door.

A tall man of imposing appearance stepped out, clad in a cloak and doublet of sad-coloured green velvet, with a broad hat and low plume fastened by a diamond buckle. His costume was a curious mixture of the old-fashioned costly grandeur of the Cavalier, tempered by the more strait-laced views of the reformers. But with regard to the sedate lady whom he courteously helped to dismount, there was no compromise whatever. Her whole dress, from her black wimple and white coif to the hem of her plain dark gown, was stiff and starched and prim as herself. No one could look upon Dame Thomasine Damerel and not see in her the most precise of Puritan matrons.

The host of the "George" led the way himself into his best parlour, newly wainscoted with oak and painted with quaint devices, while on the broad hearth, below the setting of Dutch tiles, a wood fire was burning, for the weather was chilly after the rain. The table was already spread, and a savoury smell poured in through the latticed window from the kitchen beyond, for it was the custom of travellers arriving by coach to stay and sup at the great coaching inn of Salisbury before proceeding on their way to Exeter.

It was the habit, too, of the landlord, who was a rare gossip, to stand about by the door in a casual way, and to hear and tell all the news of the day.

"Well, Josiah, how wags the world with you?" asked the great man, with a slight air of patronage and a smile on his ruddy, good-tempered face.

"These be troublous times, your honour, and bad for trade. 'Tis as much as an honest man can do, forsooth, to carry his cup level, 'twixt one side and t'other," he remarked, with a meaning shrug of his fat shoulders. "But 'tis you, sir, fresh from London town an' the Parliament, as will have all the news to bring we country folk?" he added with an air of profound deference.

"Nothing good, I fear me!" replied Sir Hugh. "Troubles thicken all around. The King is ill-advised, and now that the Queen hath joined him at Oxford all hope of a peaceful settlement with the Parliament seems to be at an end. But you are too modest, friend Josiah; you must have much to tell, for I learn that of late the main fighting hath been here in the west. How of Wardour Castle? There was a rumour met us on the way that 'twas like to be in peril."

"Like to be in peril, do 'ee say, Sir Hugh? Why, bless my soul alive! Have thee not heard as 'tis besieged by the Parliament army under Sir Edward Hungerford, and battered and well-nigh in ruins? With my Lord Arundell away at Oxford, too, with the King, and only my lady there!" exclaimed mine host, delighted to be the first with such stirring news.

"Poor Lady Arundell! I knew her well in the old days; a most perfect great lady!" sighed Sir Hugh. "But sure 'tis no such desperate case as that?"

"They do say as not a soul o' the garrison 'll escape alive! Why 'tis a matter o' thirteen hundred men o' the Parliament army encompassed round them; what wi' the forces o' Wilts, and they o' Somersetshire too!" quoted Josiah glibly.

"Poor lady! Did I think her in danger of life, I should be minded to go and fight myself on her behalf—though 'twere against mine own friends! What certainty have you of this, Josiah?" he asked anxiously.

"Why 'twas but an hour since that Silas Moleyns, as be saddler over to Shaftesbury, an' had comed hither for to buy leather—why he ran in like one distraught! He'd heard tell that Wardour'd been took wi' fire an' sword, and that the soldiers be that mad they'll spare neither woman nor child. An' he, poor Silas, wi' a mother an' sister there!"

Sir Hugh was greatly disturbed, but he had his own grave doubts as to the literal truth of this, knowing that the host of the "George" had the reputation of greedily swallowing both fact and fiction. Besides which he had some slight acquaintance with this Sir Edward Hungerford, and could not believe that an officer of such high reputation would be guilty of barbarous cruelty.

It was Dame Thomasine who broke the silence.

"'Twas a nest of malignants and Papists, as we do all know. 'Tis no marvel that they should be smitten hip and thigh like to the Amalekites."

She spoke the gruesome words in her high level voice sharply, like a frosty wind. Her husband knew her too well to be startled by this bloodthirsty remark. He was well aware that the bitter tongue belied a kindly heart, which would have given food and shelter and religious teaching to any stray Amalekites, and even, maybe, founded an almshouse for their benefit.

"But enough of carnal warfare," continued madam, addressing the landlord. "Is all well in our neighbourhood? The mail was stopped last week by highwaymen, and we have had no tidings from home since I left."

Josiah gave a startled look from one to the other.

"No news, my lady? Not since you sent the urgent summons for your young folks!" he exclaimed, with a glance full of curiosity, for this was a subject which had never been cleared up to his satisfaction.

"What mean you, my good friend?" interposed Sir Hugh, now thoroughly roused. "You speak in riddles. If you know aught concerning our home, speak it out fully."

After some confusion and hesitation Josiah managed to blurt out the story, for in the face of this real crisis all his usual eloquence had forsaken him. He told how, more than a week ago, one of the servingmen had come over in haste from Sutton Place to ask if Sir Hugh Damerel's son and daughter had passed through Salisbury on their way to town.

The man seemed at that time to know nothing beyond the fact that Master Godfrey and Mistress Cynthia had ridden off on May morning, taking a stable-lad with them, but saying no word as to their destination. But when the night came and they did not return, the domestics had taken counsel together, and concluded that their mistress must have given the young people orders to follow her to town.

"But this is madness!" interrupted Dame Thomasine. "Why should I have bid them leave in secret?"

"Ah no, madam; 'twas they made it secret," was the reply. "For the young folk be ever full of pranks and merry jests, so said your man. An' he thought maybe 'twas but a pretty frolic to put them all in alarm. In this, too, they were the more confirmed," ended the landlord, "in that young Master Paul had likewise disappeared with his nurse Patty."

No words can describe the awful change which came over the poor lady's countenance at this last statement. If a thunderbolt had fallen in that inn parlour it would have caused less dismay. With livid cheeks and eyes dilated she started to her feet, and caught the frightened speaker by the arm in a grasp of steel.

"Tell me the truth, man? Is this all you know? Where is my child?" she insisted with pathetic vehemence.

"Hush, Thomasine, my dear," pleaded her husband, who kept his self-control through it all. "Master Bartlett is not to blame. He does but tell us what was told to him. Have you had no later news?" he asked quietly.

The bearer of ill-tidings managed to stammer out that, having heard no more, he had supposed that the matter had been satisfactorily explained, and that the household at Sutton were satisfied that all was right.

"We must go home this instant," began the unhappy lady.

"Yes, yes," interrupted Sir Hugh in eager haste. "Get horses ready saddled for us at once, Josiah; the best you have in the stable. We will set off without delay."

Utterly taken aback by this peremptory order, the landlord made a feeble remonstrance.

"Nay, sir! madam!" he pleaded, turning from one to the other, "you will sup first? 'Tis all done to a turn and already dished up; the pasty of Christ Church salmon, the stuffed capons, the——"

But he was hurriedly dismissed, and no one paid any heed to his sore disappointment.

"Mark my words," said madam in a stifled voice, "'tis some devilry of Cynthia's. She would have her revenge on me, and perchance hath fallen into the trap herself!"

"Revenge? What mean you, madam? Can you cast any light on this strange tale?"

"The girl defied me utterly, and now I think on't, I left her a prisoner in her chamber, giving no thought to her, in the haste and bustle of departure."

"A vast pity, Thomasine! The maiden has a high spirit of her own, and may not be held with too tight a hand. Have I not ever been wont to say that you may lead but not drive her, or she will break bonds?"

He spoke in hurried nervous tones, restlessly pacing the room, and quite shaken out of his usual sedate decorum. But the sharp rejoinder he expected came not, and presently, startled at the silence which hung heavy on the air, he turned to see with dismay that his wife had buried her face in her hands and was rocking herself to and fro in abject despair.

In a moment Sir Hugh was by her side. He poured out a goblet of Canary wine, and persuaded her to take some refreshment, that she might have strength for the coming journey.

"Take courage, my poor Thomasine," he said tenderly; "our host is a foolish gossip who takes every rumour for gospel truth. Trust me, dear, we shall find the children safe."

But even as he spoke his own fears belied his words.

Never had those twelve miles of road from Salisbury to Sutton seemed so terribly long and weary. They made good progress at first on the broad high road through Wilton and Barford, but later on, beyond Fovant, there was no more than a rutty cart-track, made worse by the recent heavy rains, and it was all the horses could do to pick their way. But by this time madam had recovered her stern self-control, which had never before so failed her, and she jogged on steadily, hour after hour, without murmur or complaint.

Her one desire, her one aim in life was to reach home that night, and to this end all her faculties were strained, with intense nervous tension. The longest journey must come to an end at last, but the light had failed before the little party reached the old gateway of Sutton Place. All was dark and silent; it might have been a house of the dead.

But after a loud and long summons from the great bell which hung on a chain at the entrance, lights crept from window to window, and, after anxious parley from within, the door was cautiously opened. Evidently the household was barricaded, and in a state of siege, so alarming were the rumours of war in the neighbourhood.

One word, one glance, and the unhappy parents knew the worst. The incredible tale was literally true. Cynthia and Godfrey had ridden away, and little Paul and his nurse had mysteriously disappeared on May Day. On close cross-questioning it appeared that Squinting Dickon, the poacher, had been hanging about the kitchen that evening, and after making some vague inquiry about the child had slipped away and not been seen since. Beyond this there was no trace.

It was too late that evening to make further search or inquiry; that must await the morrow's break of day. And what of the night—that long silent vigil of sleepless agony? No one who knew the stern gaunt woman, the dreaded mistress of the house, at whose frown all alike trembled, would have given her credit for the passionate affection which she had so carefully concealed under a veil of harshness. The little child had been the one thing in the world which was all her own, and his strange loss wrung her heart with aching desolation.

She did not give way, woman-like, to the weak luxury of tears, but kept her watch in dry-eyed misery. Yet grief had no softening influence on one of her character and set stony creed; she saw nothing to amend in her past, but hardened her heart still more against the stepdaughter, whom she instinctively felt must be at the root of the disaster. So wore away the still hours of the night.

At the first streak of dawn, that glorious sunrise which had seen the fall of Wardour, Sir Hugh and his party set forth on their anxious search. His first thought was to make inquiry at the home of Patty, the nurse maiden, at Chilmark, but this only resulted in a waste of several precious hours, for the old mother, who was very deaf, persisted that the girl had not been home since Lady Day. The distracted father was turning his steps homewards, dispirited and worn out, when a sudden idea occurred to him. He had been met again and again with reports about Wardour Castle, some more alarming and bloodthirsty than others, but he could have no doubt that the main fact was true, and that the castle had surrendered.

Was it possible that his children had strayed away into that vicinity, and had by some chance taken refuge there? He shuddered at the thought, and yet—how else could he account for this mysterious disappearance?

His wife had watched for his return from afar, and came down to meet him under the gateway. But before her lips had framed a question the poor man shook his head in silent, hopeless confession of failure.

His foot was still in the stirrup when he suddenly cried out:

"Who comes yonder, so nimbly pricking up the hill?"

They both stood watching, rooted to the spot, for the whole world was tinged with their absorbing anxiety, and surely — this must be news!

"My life on't, but 'tis Godfrey, and riding Donna too, that Spanish mare of Cynthia's!' almost sobbed Sir Hugh. "I'd know that amble anywhere."

By a supreme effort of self-control Dame Thomasine remained outwardly calm, though she clenched her hands tightly together, as she strained her eyes in the blinding sunshine. She could see that there was another horseman following in the distance, a serving-

man most likely, but no sign of Cynthia or little Paul.

It seemed as if her heart stood still in that moment of breathless, awful expectation, until the first rider came nearer, and stood up in his stirrups to wave a battered hat, while his clear young voice rang out with joyous note:

"Why, sure, 'tis father! Hurrah! what rare good luck! All's well!"

CHAPTER XIX

But love be long or love be short,
Love be sad or gay;
Love doth make us all his sport,
For he will have his day.

THE boy had briefly told his tale. He had sought to answer all the impatient questions mercilessly thrust at him. Full of youthful enthusiasm, he was disposed to show an honest pride in the stirring adventures which had fallen in his way, and felt by no means like a culprit before his judge.

Indeed, as Godfrey stood there, in his ragged powder-stained suit, with a fearless bearing and frank open glance, there was such an air of gallant manliness about the lad as thrilled his father's heart with pride. Little more than one short week of real life—of hardship and warfare and all the dangers of a siege—had hardened his fibres till they had become like tempered steel. There was the making of a brave man here!

Full of thankfulness as he was, Sir Hugh's keen gaze could not fail to detect signs of weariness. There were dark shadows under the blue eyes and a paleness showed through the bronzed cheek.

"Godfrey, my lad," he said briskly, "you have had a rough week, and you bear the trace of it. You must be as hungry as a hunter too, after your long vigils. So you had best betake you to your chamber and change those rags for a decent suit, while we have the table set."

"Well, now I think on't, I have touched no food since daybreak, and then only a dry manchet. And I must look like a scarecrow!" laughed the boy, touching his torn doublet.

As he did so he felt the rustle of paper. "Ah, 'tis Sissy's letter: I had half forgot!" he cried, as he handed it to Dame Thomasine and left her to read it while he went his way.

She took it with a suppressed groan, and this is what she made out, in hastily written, ill-formed characters:

"DEAR AND HONOURED MADAM,—

"Ere this doth reach your Hand, I doubt not that You will have been made acquaint with all our Story, and I humbly trust your Mind will be set at Rest with Regard to our dear Paul. This alone doth embolden my Pen unto You, and so in all Honour and Reverence I pray You graciously to pardon me for the Anxiety which my rash Deed hath caused You, tho in Truth I had no such Purpose when I set forth from Home.

"I shall deem it my Duty henceforth to Conform my Will to yours and seek in all Things to obey You.

"I kiss your Hand and rest

"Your dutiful Child and Servant,

"CYNTHIA DAMEREL."

The stepmother read it aloud, with various pauses and blunders, ending up with a sigh of mistrust.

"Well, madam, what more would you have?" asked her husband eagerly. "Sure, if this letter rightly speaks her mind, the girl hath grown more like an angel than ever I should have deemed possible with my little madcap Cynthia!"

He drew a deep breath, for in his inmost heart he greatly preferred the bright sunny changeful creature—all made of smiles and mischief, with a dash of rebellion—to any angelic being which his imagination could picture.

"You need have no alarms, Sir Hugh," was the sad reply. "I fear me this sudden meekness will last but till the next time I chance to cross her fancy."

"But you will forgive the poor child, who meant no harm, and did but set forth on a frolic, which turned into grim earnest by no fault of hers?"

"Forgiveness is the duty of a Christian, and I am not like to fail in any task to which I set myself," rejoined the lady in cold measured tones, but there was an unwonted gentleness in her eye which belied her outward manner.

Then she turned aside to chide a serving-man who came in too noisily with a dish of brawn.

A light step and a fresh ringing voice, which seemed to chase away all care and trouble, echoed through the panelled chambers.

"Now that I have got rid of those unseemly tatters I feel myself again," exclaimed Godfrey. "And I warrant that you will find me a good trencher-man."

It was a pleasure to watch the bright young fellow, who brought life and movement into the gloomy house, and even called up a softened gleam of kindliness on his stepmother's face.

"I have not told you half my story," said he presently. "You must know that on our way to Tisbury, that May morning, we came across a friend who did us good service."

"Some country yokel, I doubt not," remarked madam. "You be ever too free with your friendships, Godfrey."

"Nay, truly, my dear lady, this was no country yokel, but a gallant horseman of goodly presence, well mounted and well attended. He was on the way to pay his devoirs to you, father, being the son of an old friend of yours, one Mr. James Randolph, of the Virginian colony, beyond seas."

"James Randolph did you say, boy?" exclaimed his father eagerly. "'Tis a piece of cursed luck that he should have claimed my hospitality, and found neither master nor mistress at home to welcome him."

"We warned him betimes, and he had to make shift without it," was the ready answer. "He turned back, nothing loath, and rode with us through the lanes, and past Tisbury town, with its May-day revels, and onwards to Jennifer's cottage. When we found her not there, and the storm came on, he was persuaded to journey on to Wardour Castle with us."

"Well, well, this do beat all for a jest," exclaimed Sir Hugh with a hearty laugh. "To think that young Jem Randolph should have taken the bull by the horns i' this way! On my honour, but 'tis a new way of courting! And what said Cynthia to him?"

"Cynthia!" cried Dame Thomasine in a tone of horror, with shocked propriety. "Sir Hugh, I prithee bring not a maiden's name into such ribald jesting. Your daughter would surely hearken to no suitor who was not rightly accredited by us."

"Oh, I do assure you, madam," said the boy lightly, "that Sissy was vastly taken with his company, and they became the best of friends. As indeed we all were, and little Paul would scarce be parted from him. But, ah! 'tis a doleful end to that merry friendship," he added sadly; "my poor dear Randolph will trouble you no more."

"What mean you, lad?" asked his father in sudden alarm "Surely no evil hath befallen him?"

"Alas! yes. Urged on maybe by some rash ardent words of Sissy's, Randolph set forth on a gallant sortie, to bear despatches praying for help in our sore need, and I had no choice but to follow him. As we came back through the park the enemy got scent of us, and he devised a plan to send me home in safety, the while he drew the sentry into the open, and was struck down by a musket-shot."

"Good heavens!" cried Sir Hugh, in grief and dismay. "How shall I ever send such terrible news to his hapless father and mother? And he their only hope. But, Godfrey, art thou well assured that the wound was fatal? There be more guns fired than kill their man, and 'tis somewhat rare that a chance shot do hit the mark."

"I do but know that I saw him fall. And men say that if he died not of his wound he would of a surety be shot as a spy," was the hopeless answer.

"Nay, nay, you are in the wrong there, lad. If he fell into the hands of the Parliament officers, his father's name would be well known to many as a staunch friend of freedom. Moreover, he himself was held in much esteem at Cambridge by the member for that city, Captain Cromwell, and in case of mortal danger might find his name of service. I dare not believe that bright young life can be cut off," he added with grave conviction "Did he not tell you that he had made suit to me for your sister's hand? 'Twas a vain fancy of the old friendship betwixt us two fathers that our children should wed."

"O father!" exclaimed the boy in bitter renewed grief. "Had we but known! He was the bravest, truest friend, most courtly, most gentle! With his last word he sent Sissy a ring with a ruby heart. To think by

now near a touch the poor girl hath missed happiness!"

"I pray heaven that she may yet attain it," murmured her father in low earnest aspiration.

There was a brief silence, then madam spoke, having been engaged with sundry household matters.

"I have sent word to make ready my coach, that we may fetch home Cynthia and Paul without delay."

Godfrey and his father looked at each other in dismay. This coach was a ponderous old affair, only used to go short distances, or on state occasions when Dame Thomasine went to pay calls on her neighbours in full dress.

"I had thought to take horse at once, and bring them back a-riding through the lanes. 'Twould be the quickest way," suggested her husband.

"No, truly, not by my will and leave," was the cold reply. "There shall be no more prancing in gay dalliance along the sunny glades; no more haunting of fairs and May-day revels! I myself will see to that."

In her tone there was such a ring of decision that there was nothing more to be said. It was quite plain that this was to be a penitential journey for the offenders! Poor Godfrey had it in his heart to cry out that such care was needless; that the future would be dark enough as it was.

No more cakes and ale, no more pipe and tabor, in their young lives! There might be a way of escape for him, but woe to poor Sissy, who would have to bide at home for evermore, tied to her stepdame's apron strings!

Meantime there was a fine commotion in the kitchen regions, where Giles Penney was quite a hero amongst his fellow-servants. He had never been of any account before, but now the serving-maids all hung upon his words as he spoke of war and fighting and hairbreadth escapes, till, warmed by his own eloquence, he drew the long bow and made them all quake in their shoes. To hearken to this stable-boy you would have thought that he had kept an army at bay and killed more of the besiegers than he could count.

Moreover, he told how by his ready wit he had saved Master Godfrey's life that very morning, and blew his own trumpet with great blasts. But when all this was exhausted, Giles fell to lower themes, and the incident of Patty and Squinting Dickon, in the wood, was a specially spicy morsel for the other servants. The nursemaid of little Paul, who had curried favour with her mistress by pious ways and talk, was no favourite in the kitchen.

"Aye," cried one, "an' zo 'twas why thik there poachen chap he comed round agen back door, that very night. An' zays he, in a whisper like, 'Where be Patty? An' be the young measter a-comed hoam?' An' zays I, 'Lawk-a-massy, her went off to-morn wi' the chile, an' us hav'n a-zeed nought on 'em sence.' An' zo he slinks off."

"Now then, do 'ee mark my words," cried Giles, in the tone of one who has made an important discovery; "Patty sent 'en for to ax, and so find out if Measter Paul had strayed hoam, by chance. An' when her found as he wur lost, why her wur a-feared an' runned away!"

This clever suggestion was received with so much applause that Giles' old friend, the tame jackdaw, took occasion to fly on his shoulder, screaming and scolding, at which there was renewed shouting and mirth.

But all too soon the hero of the hour was summoned from the scene of his triumph to help in the stable, for all the serving-men about the place were needed to carry out this whim of the mistress. The four strongest cart-horses had to be collected and groomed and harnessed, and even then there was much ado before the heavy carriage could be got under way.

It was late afternoon, and still the lumbering chariot rumbled and creaked and jolted over the rough country roads, and the glowing spring sunshine smiled down with benignant indifference on all. The solemn slow procession had reached at length the corner of the rough track turning up to the common, and madam had just been informed, with due deference, that her coach could go no farther, as the lane ended in a narrow bridle-path. She turned to her husband, who was nodding drowsily by her side, and cried sharply:

"If you can rouse yourself to descend we will proceed on foot to the Moleyns' cottage."

But Godfrey, who was riding alongside the coach, forestalled his father.

He sprang from his horse and courteously offered her the support of his arm, which, somewhat to his surprise, she accepted with a touch of content, while she held up her stiff skirt and delicately picked her way through the mud. Together they turned round by the sharp angle, under the overgrowth of bramble, where the starry clematis clambered and ran riot. They came suddenly upon a cleared space of common land on which those two lonely cottages had been built by some squatter on the parish land.

It was a picturesque spot. To the left was a sedge-bordered pool, by whose brink silvery birches spread their dainty heads, and the fresh breeze swayed the branches of the hoary willows. Yet all this was but the background of the picture which arrested the startled gaze of the new-comers. There, in the dappled shadow, stood a tall, strong-limbed youth in a faded suit of dark velvet, with a plumed cap on his wavy hair, while, close by his side, leaned against a lichen-clad trunk a slim girl, with wild-rose cheeks and hair like threads of gold. Her fresh lips were parted slightly, and she was looking up at him with a sunny smile which might have made the roses bloom in mid-winter.

Godfrey, coming of a sudden upon this Arcadian scene, paused, breathless and aghast. Even at that distance he could scarcely fail to recognise his sister, but . . . surely his mind was wandering, for, in the name of heaven! who was that standing by her side? He gave one quick eager glance towards his stepmother. If this were no deceptive vision, no cruel mirage to cheat his thirsting soul, then he would read the truth on her indignant face. For he well knew that she would not parley with evil, and that to her such love-making would be "anathema."

But his mute appeal met with no response, for, as it chanced, at that instant a child ran lightly towards them, across the sun-kissed meadow; a little meagre-faced boy with torn doublet and ungartered hose. But for Dame Thomasine it was enough, and all the world beside was blotted out as, giving full sway to her long pent-up mother-love, she met her little Paul with outstretched arms.

Another moment and Godfrey Damerel had made a wild rush forward to meet this strange gallant face to face and solve the mystery which baffled all conjecture. He dared not believe his eyes, which assured him that it was indeed James Randolph in the flesh. This new-born hope was too good to be true.

He was white to the lips, and could only frame the broken words, half under his breath:

"Randolph! By what magic or miracle——?"

"Why, Godfrey, my dear lad, what ails you? Methinks you have the mien of one who sees a spectre!" cried the genial hearty voice which had grown so dear and familiar, and which he had never hoped to hear again. "Ah, you must have thought me dead, and I had no means to let you know of my well-doing. And I, too, have had sore misgivings about you two; but an hour like this makes amends for all."

He turned unconsciously towards Cynthia, who had drawn back in alarm, until she recognised her brother, when she exclaimed eagerly:

"O Godfrey, is my father very angry? Will he forgive me for playing truant, think you? And madam, what saith she?"

"On my word, Sissy, your luck far exceeds your deserts!" he cried with a hidden meaning which she understood not. "You will have easy shrift when the truth is made plain. My father follows close upon my heels, and as for madam, why she hath got Paul back! And now, Randolph, have some pity on my impatience, and tell me quick how you made your escape."

"You saw me fall in the Wardour woods on that fatal night, hit by a musket-shot, and gave me up for lost," was the ready answer; "but the bullet had no billet for me that time, thank Heaven. La! 'twas but a mere flesh-wound, and hath had good tending. I was taken prisoner before one of the officers in command, Colonel Strode, and roughly handled by my captors on the way. And in that I had good luck, for a leathern case slipped from my pouch, in the which were letters, and the troopers making naught of them, they were handed to the colonel, and served to bring about a right good understanding between us. There was one from my father, whom he had heard of, and one from Captain Cromwell, which he read with all respect. He vowed that I should be lodged in none other prison save his

own tent, where the chirurgeon saw me daily."

"Ah, Randolph, if you knew how we have mourned for you!" cried Godfrey, full of heartfelt relief.

There was a sound of approaching steps, and the young man turned with a courteous greeting to meet Sir Hugh Damerel, who had followed close upon his son.

"Ah, sir, I never thought such strange, untoward events would take place before our next meeting!"

"But, tell me, how came you hither, my lad?" asked the good knight, who was still too bewildered to grasp the unexpected.

Randolph briefly repeated the story of his adventures, adding:

"As you know, sir, 'twas but this very morning that Wardour surrendered to its fate. I had sure tidings that the ladies would be conveyed at once to Shaftesbury. At daybreak, when the bugle sounded reveille, I took leave of my friendly host, who gave me a safe pass, and promised that, should my man Gideon fall into his hands, he would restore him to me, and also the horses. Then I set off along the road which I knew well, to await the coming of the prisoners, at the foot of the steep hill where I made sure they would halt. In due time the sad procession came in sight, strictly guarded by a troop of horse. My Lady Arundell was in the midst, and, by means of my letters of mark, I got word of her after some delay. She received me most graciously, and gave me to know that the lady I sought was not of her company, but she bestowed her good wishes on me, and bid me seek the missing one amid her own people. I turned back disconsolate, when of a sudden I called to mind that the maid Jennifer dwelt here, and so by great good fortune came upon the right track."

"And you travelled hither at a most nimble pace, it doth appear, young sir!" cried Sir Hugh, who was beginning to pick up the threads of the story, and felt that, matters having gone so far without him, he had best take the guidance of them henceforth into his own hands. "What say you, madam, to this young gallant who hath taken us all by storm?" he added, with a glint of quiet humour in his eye as he turned to look for his wife.

But Dame Thomasine was out of hearing, and by good fortune she had taken no notice of a scene which would have outraged all the prim proprieties of her life, and might have seemed to her only meet for the wooing of a milkmaid.

In truth, at that moment she had still no thought but for her precious Paul, whom she held tightly by the hand, and who stood timidly looking up at her, full of a certain vague memory of past severity, and blindly unconscious of the craving mother-love which all his life she had schooled herself so well to hide.

Meantime Cynthia was like one in a dream. She had stood apart, a mute spectator of the meeting, still full of commotion in her heart with all the marvels which the day had already brought forth. But now an unformed suspicion awoke at this strange acquaintance between her father and Randolph.

Where could they have met before, and what was this secret understanding between them? She looked from one to the other with questioning eyes, and there was that in her gaze which would brook no denial.

James Randolph was the first to speak, and there was a tremor in his voice which betrayed his misgivings and lack of assurance.

"I have a confession to make, and must crave your forgiveness, dear. Do you call to mind how on that far-off May-day ride—yet in truth 'twas but a week ago—you and your brother made merry talk of a certain 'staid, discreet man, of godly discipline,' who was coming to woo you? Cynthia! what would you say if I should prove to be the rumoured suitor, the 'discreet' man? Though Heaven knows that I be all unworthy even of such limping praise!" he added fervently to himself.

The girl drew back with a quivering breath, and the flame of young blood glowed on her cheek. There rose up before her the whimsical vision of that mysterious wooer, whom she had pictured to herself in the image of good Master Balsum, and a smile played round her lips, while her eyes grew dim with slow creeping tears.

As for Sir Hugh, his fancy was vastly tickled, and he cried out in huge content:

"Ah, now the truth is out, and you are caught, you wilful maid, in a net of your own devising! So tell me, Cynthia, when you are minded to wed, will you take a husband of my choice, and make shift with this young

Virginian who hath crossed the southern seas to woo thee?"

With a humorous twinkle he looked at his daughter, all agog for some merry repartee. Then of a sudden light dawned upon him, and he realised that his little maid had put away her childhood, with its sprightly quips and cranks, and had bloomed into gracious womanhood, with all a woman's trembling hopes and fears. Quick to note the danger-signal on her sensitive face, he masked his own emotion with an air of bluster, and turned to her lover.

"Make your peace with her, my lad, and win her if you can." Then he added: "Come, Godfrey, we will e'en leave them to follow, while we go and make ready for the homeward journey."

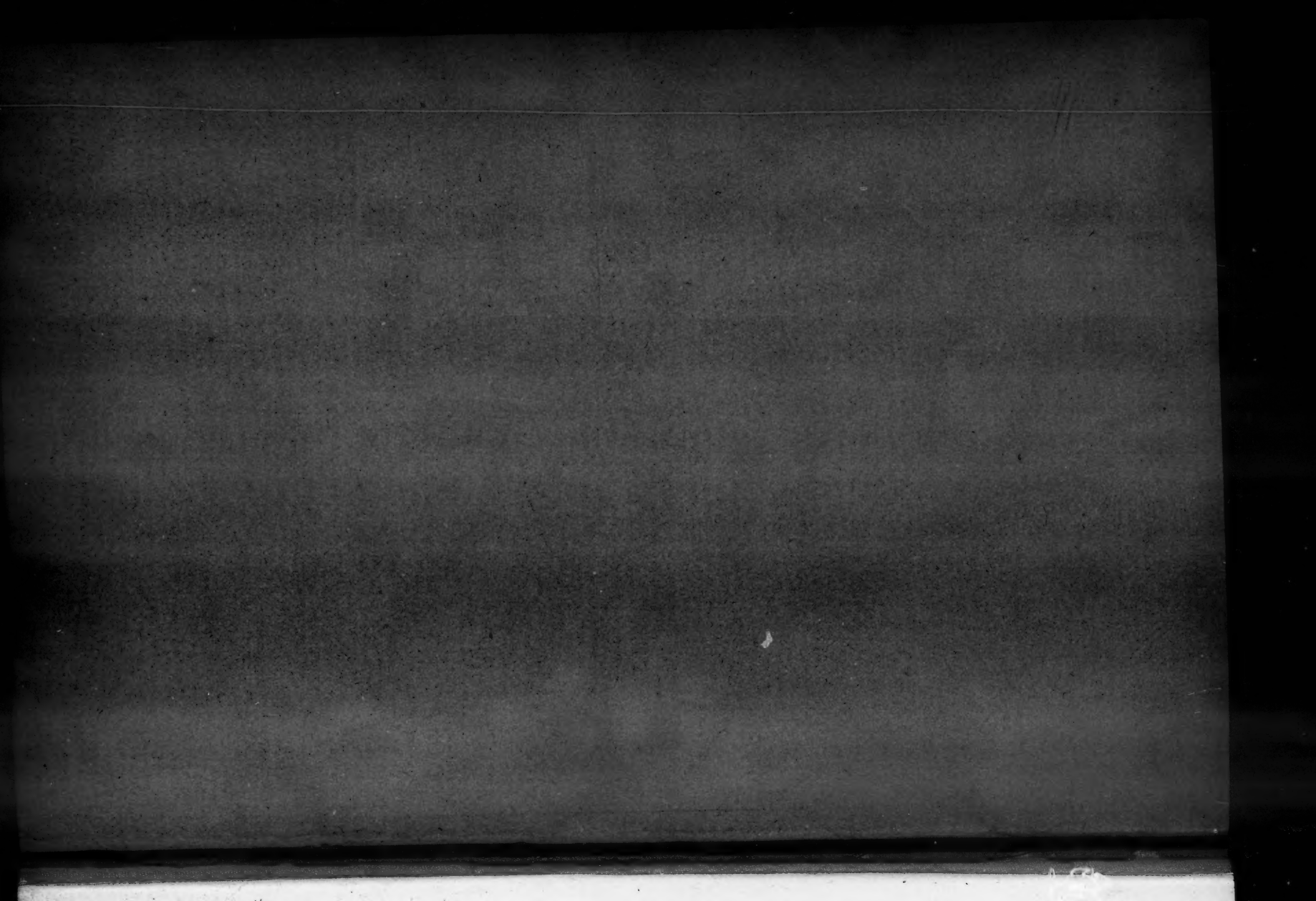
On a swift impulse the girl made a faltering step to join them, but Randolph was already by her side to plead yearningly for pardon. As a last debt to her girlish pride she made a little feint of protest, but, sure of her and of himself, his hands gathered round hers with ardent pressure, and so he pledged his troth.

Hope supreme held that hour of bewildering revelations. They had faced death together, and together they twain would be strong to face all that life might bring them in its unopened casket.

Cynthia felt that nature was at one with her, and that all living things drew softly near to share her secret. Rejoicing voices seemed to float faintly towards her, and a fresh gladness dawned over the world, with a sense of eternal youth.

Man and maid, they were under the spell which, once felt, lingers in the heart for evermore.

"She was looking up at him with a sunny smile which might have made the roses bloom in mid-winter"

THE END

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